
THE HEX WOMAN
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The Hex Woman

by

Raube Walters

Published 1931

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RECENT events in Eastern Pennsylvania have shown the persistence of hexing, or witchcraft, among the Pennsylvania Dutch. In this remarkable novel is told the story of three sisters coming from a respectable family whom circumstances forced into witchcraft. How from poverty they rose to sudden power, and what use they made of it to secure the life-right of love upon the shunned top of Hexenkopf, the bewitched mountain summit, makes a story of somber power—witchcraft opposed to a stern morality as relentless and mysterious as witchcraft itself.

The almost Biblical language of the characters adds richness to a prose that is certain to be hailed as among the finest in contemporary literature.





THE HEX WOMAN

by Raube Walters

THE
MACAULAY COMPANY
NEW YORK



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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO

THE ONE BEST FRIEND

MICHAEL ANTHONY MCGUIRE, JR.

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THE HEX WOMAN

CHAPTER ONE

THEY had come from all parts of Williams Township, these expectant relatives. Susannah's will was to be read and she was a wealthy woman, sister of Aaron Robb, founder of Robbsville, and last heir under the land grant of William Penn. To this end Susannah had zealously guarded the heavy parchment with its scrawled signature; had fondled it with age-brittled fingers as she displayed it to numerous nieces and nephews; had fought to preserve its vitality and validity against the encroachments of that State which superseded the Grand Paternalist.

Always Susan had companioned men. As a tiny infant on the boat from Hamburg to America, she had gone least reluctantly to the arms of her father, Thadeus. Later she sat sedately on his left, Aaron to his right, in the taproom of the Coffeetown Tavern. Voices of men discussing Colonial policy had burred

pleasantly in her small ears; her eyes had devoured bright coats and sprigged waistcoats and lace ruffles.

There had been many visits to the tavern taproom while Thadeus Robb awaited the transfer assignment of a land grant made years previously to his uncle by the august, austere Penn. And when it came by post rider to a snow captive village, Thadeus was dead and laid on the high hill, crowned with clustered cedars, where the Robbs were to bury their dead for decades that have crowded into more than a century. Across the valley from this burying ground stood the elephantine bulk of Hexenkopf, a huge rock about which nocturnal spirits held saturnine revels, according to local lore.

With Thadeus dead, his widow and children settled into a long, low, roomy house several miles from Coffeetown. Bound boys tilled the fertile fields and filled huge granaries and fattened poultry, sheep and hogs. Clara, the mother, looked after the score of bees' hives which stood at sedate attention on the gentle slope in back of the house. For

the children there were a multiplicity of chores, all tending to frugal prosperity. From the wharf at the end of the graveled garden walk, rafts floated the produce down the wide Delaware to Philadelphia market places.

In the summer, fields of wheat merged their sun-flecked gold into the husky tan of rye, to be followed by green acres of timothy and hay grass. Gentle winds billowed the heads on their slender, dainty stalks until the cultivated acreage looked like a ballet of frail, graceful women. Or again in the arid season these dusty foods, unhappy for lack of water, resembled tired infantry, overdrilled but too well disciplined to suffer much. Clara, large of hip and bare of foot, was the grand marshal of all this fecundity. With German patience she harvested and planted year after year, spending little, saving most against the maturity of her son Aaron. To her Susannah was secondary, useful but limited.

Susannah grew into precocious maturity, strong, big-boned, well-fleshed. At thirteen she looked eighteen and knew the emotional needs of a woman of twenty. Full fashioned, like Clara, she was ideal

maternity material. Following the field laborers at their work, gleaning, she observed them, made her choice and revealed her desire. A mere man in a region of few women, he suffered animal desire and accepted.

That night Susan crept softly down the hall, carpeted with wide boards, let down the heavy bar and made her barefoot way towards the barn loft where the men slept. Something in the child trembled at the audacity of the woman but she would not turn back. At the barn door she hesitated, only to see it slowly swing open and the object of her desire slip out. Watching him her fear was submerged in her passion for the sweet, brawny, man-strength of his arms.

Clumsily they kissed, almost experimentally—he because he had been so long separated from the feminine softness of scented, piled hair and lush breasts; she because it was new and very sweet. Moonlight silvered tenderness that found passion and became lust. Lust hid itself in new mown hay behind shadowing barns and learned tenderness again of slow-creeping dawn and satiation.

Cocks were crowing shrilly, the cloud-hidden moon had grayed the sward as Susannah laggardly turned toward the house. The door swung open to reveal Clara, clad in a voluminous night gown, draped in shadows from a horn-plated lantern.

What passed between mother and daughter Susannah never told. Clara kept silence. But a new tenderness and maternal understanding gilded an August harvest day to be succeeded by weary shamed weeks of fearful waiting. Only when all possible danger of pregnancy had passed did peace mate again with prosperity. Susan, having tasted passion, fled love throughout her seventy years of life. This thing Aaron never knew.

Reluctantly he gave her the half of Thadeus' possessions, enriched by Clara's shrewd care, subtly resenting her unmarried state. All of the man protested against relinquishing these goods and acres to the acumen of a mere woman. But Clara had so willed and Susannah was thirty and unmarried.

Now, earlier in this Spring of 1845, Susan had died, sleeping alone behind the locked doors of the house from which she had once crept trembling passionately.

Men were sleeping in the barn loft as before, but now they were merely men, unromantic animals from whom she had exacted a hard day's toil. Maids slumbered in rooms down the corridor but her quiet passing was as unobserved as her cat-like exit to love had been.

So she had been ox-carted to eternal sleep beside her father and Aaron, whose death preceded hers by two years. All of the direct heirs to this fertile valley which Penn had ceded to their forebear slept there beneath the boughs of somber cedars. Her pastor murmured prayers, hastened by the damp cold of a Spring morning. Her relatives wept dutifully and strength passed to decay.

Gathered in Susan's parlor that early Summer afternoon were numerous nieces, nephews and cousins, most of the women accompanied by husbands. Commonplace furniture that with the dignity of years would appreciate to fabulous value was commonplace to them. Waxed tables caught and tossed random sunbeams in a bright game of catch as catch can.

Women passionately desired these broad acres for

their husbands and sons, visioning an heritage for unborn generations of chubby grandchildren. Men craved the comfort of low settles, broad fireplaces and snowy curtains with which Susan had been at much pains to

display her prosperity. Greedy, their eyes resented each one the other while their lips murmured polite, unselfish, well-wishing phrases.

Just to the left of the fireplace, on a severe, backless bench, sat William Marson, his wife Sarah, Susannah's niece, and their triplets, Elizabeth, Mary and Anne. Now in the late twenties, for years these girls had been looked upon as spinsters in a community that practiced teen-age marriage. Women glanced at them with scarce-hidden contempt, men without interest. They were settled into an allotted place; they had not married. Nothing would ever happen to them.

Each of these girls differed from the others. Elizabeth, a tall, bony woman, whose bustle became her badly because of sinewy hips, returned stare for stare from cold black eyes of beetle quality. Something of gentleness distinguished Mary—a gentleness that was not reflected in the unmaternal flatness

of her breasts, the slim grace of a neck that sixty years later would have been thought beautiful. Drabness and scrawniness made Anne look more than her years. Insipid eyes turned slowly beneath veined lids and her lips were creased as if she had just entered the room on a frigid day. In a day when bustles and ruffles accented luscious curves inviting to masculine eyes and hands, their boyish, slender bodies were gauntly ugly.

Marson, their father, was of hard-muscled English peasant stock who coming to Pennsylvania had worked himself out of temporary slavery and married the unattractive daughter of his master Aaron. He was well aware that Sarah was a problem to the aging man. It was even rumored that he was encouraged to the illicit, unblessed intercourse which had culminated in triplets, matrimony and thirty fecund acres, well stocked. Aaron was unwilling to see his daughter unmarried and Will was a healthy, if unintelligent, male. In a day when bundling as a preface to marriage was not only tolerated but encouraged, it is not unlikely that Sarah's father appealed to the Englishman's cupidity.

Despite the fine farm and because of poor management, parochial prejudice and limited intelligence, Marson was poverty ridden. He drove Sarah as he would not have dared drive a bound girl. His daughters shared the field labor with him to save the wage of hired hands. The villagers and

neighboring farmers, people of relatively little chivalry, resented his treatment of his womenfolk and let him know it. With English stubbornness and arrogant pride he drove them that much the harder and to no purpose. Prosperity turned aside at his meadow gates and enraged him by blessing his neighbors. He became silent, morose, unsocial. At the tavern he avoided gossip and pipes and drained unnumbered glasses of ale and beer. At fifty-five he was the Township sot and the most thoroughly despised man in Northampton County.

Since entering Susan's parlor no one had spoken to Marson and he had addressed himself to no one. Several of the women had spoken kindly to Sarah and niggardly to her daughters but were driven to mean, malicious silence by Marson's black visage. At a feast of wolves he was the reminding skull.

Looking at him and watching his gloating, avaricious glance covetously caressing everything in sight, they felt redeemed from the dross of their own gross greed. Men gossiped in little groups, looking at him sidewise and with no effort at concealing their soft-spoken contempt. Children slyly grimaced at him, reflecting the quiet tones of pitying but pitiless women. He surcharged the air with the fetid ugliness of his own hate and barricaded his wife and daughters behind an impolitic demeanor. Some few of the wives of more prosperous farmers wished the Marsons well for Sarah's sake, remembering the girl kindly from their dame's school days.

Sarah sat meekly, silently, twisting the fabric of her skirt between fingers scarred by toil and ingrained dirt, unproud of either her husband or daughters. Weak blue eyes watered at remembered pain and her back ached from early morning weeding in the garden. She felt out of place here, for Susannah had openly disapproved and mocked the marriage. Out of her sense of loyalty to Will, Sarah had rarely visited her aunt upon those few occasions when her husband allowed her leisure. She was not

quite certain what she expected, less certain what she had a right to expect. Her wifely duty she felt was to desire much for Will's sake but she could not enthusiastically do it. She was not unaware of his. husbandly failings. His hand had fallen heavily upon her. In addition to domestic duties she fulfilled the role of an object of passion. She loathed it now but her

husband knew no restraint in his mastery. So she sat thinking aimlessly, seldom, if ever, turning her thoughts to her daughters, product of her youthful lustiness. Of all the group she was perhaps the only one completely free of uncharitable envy.

James Sachenal, first of a distinguished family to grace the bar of Pennsylvania, entered this human-cluttered room with graceful, decorous urbanity. His entrance caused a stir; he had paid court to Susannah for long, unsuccessful years. A bachelor, his blue broadcloth coat displayed the figure of a gentleman in an era when a distended belly and soft muscles clad in good cloth were the external symbols of gentility. Ornate fobs on gaudy ribbons, protruding from flapped waistcoat pockets, accentuated his rotundity, and his beringed fingers, soft and very

white, elicited smiles from young men and frowns from toil-marked elders.

Beneath his arm, protected by the dignity of a gold-headed stick, he carried the neatly folded fools-cap bound in red legal tape that was the last will and testament of Susannah Robb. Actuated by an amateur sense of the dramatic that distinguished and revealed itself most when pleading in the Easton courts, he removed the tape with excessive solemnity, spread out the papers on a maple table and adjusted steel rimmed spectacles. A row of sweat beads glistened on his balding forehead which he meticulously wiped with a fringed bandanna of silk.

The heirs-presumptive ranged themselves about the table, impatient of his foppish delays. After the usual legal preamble his voice took a somber, deep tone as he chanted the various bequests. The women were enchanted, enjoying the unctuous, well-manered voice as much as the successive surprises of unexpected bequests.

Congratulations were hoarsely whispered only to be returned in kind as another paragraph was intoned. Occasionally Sachenal would stop ominously

until unaccustomed quiet greeted his ears. Mild reproof would creep into his eyes but he said nothing.

And then with suddenness the counselor intoned, “To my great-nieces, Elizabeth, Mary and Anne Marson, I leave my house, the three acres adjacent to it, and all my furnishings and personal effects to have and to

hold for their use, comfort, and convenience for the term of their natural lives."

Sachenal folded the will almost abruptly into its original creases and in a breathless voice continued with mincing precision, "That is all, save that I deem it my duty to tell you all that recent decisions in the courts complicate various bequests from your late lamented relative." He hesitated as they pressed closer, "You to whom she has devised acreage ceded to the family by Penn, must face the fact that these decisions have invalidated certain of the grants made by the Proprietor. Just which lands and grants are affected it is impossible to say now, but no clear title can be conveyed for several years, perhaps even a longer time."

Ceremoniously he picked up his hat and stick and started edging his way toward the door through

grumbling, querying groups of disgruntled, uncertain heirs. Stopping first with this one and then with that, he was several minutes in reaching the exit where he was confronted disconcertingly by Elizabeth.

"The house," she said. "What about the house? Is it ours or ain't it?" Her eyes held a fierce, primitive intensity; her figure was rigid to a military stiffness; her hands gnawed the ruffled edge of her bustle hem.

"Unquestionably it is yours, my dear Elizabeth," Sachenal replied in unctuous paternal tones.

He found himself wondering how any one could feel even a paternal interest in such unsightly women. And then in a more judicial manner as he bowed himself out, "It is the only real estate of Miss Susan in no way dependent upon the validity of the grant. I shall arrange transfer of title as soon as possible. Good afternoon! Do remember me to your sisters, please."

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY Autumn had spiced the year with bronze chrysanthemums and late asters when Elizabeth marshaled Mary and Anne to their new estate of independence. Burdened with bundles of clothing tied up in petticoats they made their way to their new home over the same road which each morning swarmed with children schoolward bound. Marson, surly at their good fortune, refused to transport their meager personal possessions by buggy to Susan's house. "Daughters and damned," he replied to Sarah's cajolery. "Heartless, stiff necked heathen they be, goin' off in butcherin' season and lettin' us to shift for ourself." And he took himself off to the barnloft where he drank himself stupid with the new hired hand necessitated by the going of the triplets.

There he unburdened himself to the stolid German. "Hussies, that's what they are! Women ain't

no good for nothin' save to pleasure men. When you let 'em get above that they loses their place and you can't do nothin with 'em. That's what happened to Susan. Cranky old bitch with money and no man to do her good. Left that land to my girls to spite me. I hope she rots stinking in her grave, I do." With repetitions of this theme and long pulls on the stone liquor crock, he passed the afternoon until Sarah called him to the supper of scrapple and fried mush. Passing her in the doorway he smacked her thigh cruelly and leered with unpleasant suggestiveness as countrymen leer at women in a cheap brothel.

He half suspected that his daughters had offered their mother part of their good fortune in a home away from her husband. But he knew nothing of the fearful loyalty back of the refusal expressed simply, "I'll stick to Will. He needs me. You girls are young and I can always run 'cross fields if they's much goes wrong." Sarah had seen her chance of salvation and made her choice. She knew that despite the rigidity of the marriage contract as interpreted then, few would condemn and many condone her leaving Marson. Many neighboring wives had whispered

to her after church, “I suppose now you’ll live with the girls, Sarah, and have it real nice. Lord love you! And you should, bein’ deserving of it, after living with Will Marson these years.” She had smiled hurriedly through eyes misted with tears and said she didn’t know. Returning to the farm that afternoon, Sarah busied herself about the cool spring-house, skimming wrinkled cream off pans of golden milk; changing the silver-green maple leaves wrapped round pats of butter and gathering watercress for supper from the spring itself. Outside, the brook clattered on the ochre stones of its reddish bottom; catbirds echoed their feline song; cows noisily sucked in water from the quiet eddy of a mirroring pool.

Not suddenly, but with growing certainty, Sarah knew that this was home as no other place could ever be. Here her father had placed her, dowering her for life, and Marson was merely an incidental intrusion on pastoral peace. Returning to the house, she yielded herself to his pawing caresses but found herself soaring above them in an attitude that was to

“compensate her with few exceptions the rest of her life.

Placidly she had helped the girls gather their belongings, fetching small objects from all parts of the house, slipping in packets of seeds against their first year’s gardening away from her, reminding them of numerous ways of thrift known only to one schooled in parsimony such as she had had to learn. It was the nearest moment emotionally Sarah would ever experience with her daughters. Even the self sufficient, domineering Elizabeth was swept with an alien tenderness and passed calloused, caressing hands shyly across her mother’s cheeks.

Sarah, afraid of her own maternal yearning, knelt hastily to draw one of the bundles tighter, murmuring, “Ach! Such foolishness. It’s just across the meadows, kinder.” Reluctantly she tied the last knots, fussing stolidly over their comfort, raping her dower chest of its last homespun, the only remaining quilt of Clara’s working, pieced out in foreign stuffs to a loveliness that hurt something in Sarah. Then, standing in the kitchen doorway, her arms rolled in her apron, her face confused by unvoiceable

concern, she had said tonelessly, “Well, good-by, girls. I will be over when we finish butcherin’. Always shutter up careful at night.” Beyond these she found no words.

Coarse woolen petticoats, swollen fabric paniers, swung from the crooked arms of the triplets as they trod heavily the half mile to their new home. Something of festival occasion must have been associated writh the transition, for they wore unaccustomed shoes and stockings that singed their feet and slowed their pace. Elizabeth strode a little ahead of her sisters, carrying the keys which had been delivered to her the night before by Sachenal's farmer. There was only the one set of keys and they had seemed hers by right of an innate, unconscious authority over her less aggressive sisters. Now she held them clutched tightly in her left hand which was clenched under the protective covering of her wide, white fichu. Every few paces she would look at them as if she were afraid some supernatural power had substituted meaningless weight for their stubby, shiny heftiness. She liked the feel of the keys, cautiously cool at first, then warming to an intimacy

with their carrier. They were her keys much more than her sisters', she felt. It was good to have keys; even her mother was without them. But, of course, her mother had a husband and keys belonged rightfully to a man.

And so she remembered Susannah who also had no man, no husband, and who had carried these same keys on a soft, pliable leather thong beneath her starched white apron. And remembering Susan she thought of childhood visits to the house that was now to be her home and that of her sisters.

It had not been often that they had visited their mother's aunt but these infrequent visits had smelt of a life denied them. Her mouth watered at recollected fragrances emanating from Susan's kitchen, that wide room stuffed with foods and unusual condiments kept so strictly by Martha, Susan's cook. There was the time when adventuring into this olfactory pleasurance she had sprinkled pepper on her cake thinking it a different sugar, and howled her pain and disappointment. Her aunt had indignantly protested to Sarah, "You who are of good family bring up your children so poorly that they know not

pepper. Shame that your father, my brother Aaron though he was, could do no better his daughter by than that good-for-nothing Will Marson. You were not so old and men are not so needful." And Susan had taken her squalling

great-niece unto her ample lap and wiped her tears with the softness of clean white cotton which Sarah could not afford. The touch of the goods so gentle and so exquisitely clean had been almost worth crying to attain. Another cake was brought her covered with butter and honey and she fell asleep to be rudely awakened to the necessity of returning home where cakes were less plentiful and never quite so good, and where butter and honey "all together, both at the same time" was utterly unknown.

They had been a little older when Susannah entertained them with her harp. Except for backwoods fiddlers they had experienced no music and they stood in silent, starry-eyed awe watching the gentle. vibration of the black walnut Medusa, carved realistically at the apex of the instrument. Even now Elizabeth could feel her eyes sway to the hypnotic attraction of that carven head with its weird, writhing

hair. Her mother had wept softly and admitted to being tired and on Susannah's insistence had retired to the huge pineapple four poster bed of honeyed maple coagulated in mottled patterns. They had watched her assisted into its mystery of sheets and featherticks and she had looked small and dainty against the prim arrangement of coverings and ruffled pillowslips.

That afternoon Susan had taken her to the barns and fields with her and Elizabeth recalled her shocked surprise when her mother's aunt upbraided a laborer idling beneath a shade tree. Solemnly she had reproved Susan, "So a woman should not talk to a man ever." But the man had slunk away and Susan paid no attention to Elizabeth's protest. As Elizabeth grew older she had sometimes envied Susan this power, had promised herself that some day she too should talk so to men. Only she had returned heretofore to her father and the hard field labor. Now perhaps she would realize this ambition.

Passing the sandstone schoolhouse which stood only a few hundred feet from Susan's late home, Elizabeth drew herself more erect, felt herself more

assured in her command of her sisters. Here was an experience in which they had had no part. Once for five weeks she had gone to school. Silently her lips formed the syllables of the alphabet and then slowly reconstructed

their vaguely remembered symbols into her name. When she had spent her brief time at school, made her short change from the life of her sisters, she had been but mildly interested in the schoolmaster's mysteries but profoundly fascinated by noontime visits to Susan's house. She had never spoken of these visits to her sisters, only occasionally revealing her superior information by a murmured "Of course" to some surprised comment of theirs.

Clinging in draped magnificence to the horsehair back of Susan's tete-a-tete she had seen the peacock loveliness of a Paisley shawl. She had let it entice her fingers to intimacy, had dared take it from its Susan-ordained resting place; had elatedly adventured its glory across her scrawny shoulders. Tying two corners into an ungainly knot she had promenaded before the ceiling-high mirror in the drawing room preening herself. When a slight noise had startled her she turned fright-fraught eyes to Susan

looming in the door. But her great-aunt had smiled and said, "Expensive too much is my Paisley for younger to play with but you a shawl shall have of your own." Elizabeth remembered that the promised, coveted shawl had never been hers. Marson, informed of the proposed gift, rudely refused consent. "If I can't dress my own women it shan't be a lone woman without sense to marry a strong man and have pups o' her own beddin' shall do it for me."

The triplets had reached the little lane close by Carty's farm where they must turn off the main highway for Susan's stony seat. Their petticoat burdens swung heavily now and Mary and Anne stooped a little, although Elizabeth's shoulders were unwilted by the burdened, heated walk. Pushing aside the gate they strode up the walk, becoming hesitant as they approached the wide, white paneled door with its deep molding beaded by hand. None of them had ever opened this door save by special invitation and permission of Susan. Now it must be unlocked as well as pushed open, both without her authorization. By common consent the task was Elizabeth's but she indicated her momentary rout by

seating herself on the edge of the stoop leading to the doorway and idly picking open a knotted shoelace as she remarked casually, "Lan's! It do beat 'un out just such a little walk by our place here."

Pale cerise had crusted the edge of the sun and tinted nearby clouds. Grass and leaves, revived with the first promise of night, appeared more vividly green. Breezes, captive in the earlier embrace of a tepid day, suggested cool, restful twilight. Mary, gazing about her, felt more friendly toward this uncordial, remote house. Divesting her feet of the unaccustomed shoes and hose she padded softly toward the garden to the rear of the house. Anne followed her. Elizabeth sat on.

She knew what they would find in the garden where the dead and decaying remnants of Susan's husbandry dulled any possible appreciation of the twilit languor. The garden had been a long standing puzzle to Elizabeth. Bordered with perennial flowers, its neat rows of vegetation watered and cultivated by Susan herself, it had aroused ambition in Elizabeth. She had wanted to create a replica of it on a small piece of land in back of the slatted, leaning

corncrib. Proudly and with gaiety she had begged flower seeds of her mother, confiding her plans for a garden like Aunt Susan's. Gravely her mother told her that her father disapproved flowers but seeing the child's disappointment Sarah had volunteered to ask Will to modify his refusal. Sarah, too, appreciated their perfumed loveliness and secretly regretted Will's rejection of their appeal.

That night at supper she carried the heavy plate of ruddy ham between apron-covered hands and set it before him as a peace offering prefacing her request. "Elizabeth, Will, she wants that we should have flowers in the little piece the corncrib behind like Susan's garden."

"Like Susan's garden," he snarled. "So even now she would tell me, a man, what should grow in my land. Tell me as knows more 'bout plantin' and farmin' than all those dam' Dutch fools.…"

"Ach, now Will, a few flowers.…" protested Sarah.

"A few flowers when the ground they takes would give rye or oats. And next we must have seeded the land about the house, too, I suppose, because as

Susan's gone and done such foolishness. We must raise flowers around the pig sty so the dung will not smell. A few flowers.… I" he sputtered. "Tell the old bitch I'll have none o' her prettyin' up my place and she can keep

her tongue off my women suggestin' such. You hear me! Tell her that from me or I will and I'm not one who says it pretty. Flowers! Jesus Christ!" He seemed to have exhausted himself and lapsed into a silence which his wife and daughters dared not break. Mulling it over he muttered to himself during the meal, arising suddenly and bringing his fist down upon the table so that Sarah's luster pitcher toppled over and dripped milk onto the rag runner. "Flowers!" he exploded. "I say no and don't any of you stinking wenches say me nay." And he stalked out to bed down the cattle.

Patiently Sarah mopped up the milk, washed the dishes and noticed with sorrow the crack in the blue and bronze spout of the milk jar. It had been Clara's and she had liked its pleasant reflection of firelight as it stood in its place on the mantle. Her other preparations for the night finished, she turned to the helping girls and said severely, "You see, we must:

not plant flowers. Your father does not like them and they waste good ground.… Good night."

Elizabeth had lain awake puzzling this. If flowers wasted ground how did it happen Aunt Susan gave them so much attention? She knew Susan's reputation for frugality, even parsimony, and she could not understand the wasted ground in Susan's garden. Perhaps, after all, her father might be wrong. She went to sleep determined to talk to him herself.

In the morning while he was pulling on his dung-crusted boots, following breakfast, she approached him. "Pop, I want flowers. Aw, please, Aunt Susan wastes nothin' she can help savin' and she has 'em, pop." Much thought had gone into this speech. Elizabeth spoke only under imperative circumstances.

Marson looked up frowning nastily. "Flowers, you wench, did I not say they waste ground, manure and labor? Would you be like Susan whose stubbornness keeps men away? God knows daughters are shame enough to any man and small worth without that they should tongue back like as if they wore pants. Flowers, you want, eh? I'll give you

a taste of what you need." And he had caught her roughly by the wrist, twisting it dexterously, so that she was thrown onto the floor. With his other hand he shied his boot at her, catching her a brutally bruising blow on the right hip. As she lay whimpering he stalked over and struck her heavily

across the mouth. “Flowers, huh? That’ll teach you to talk to me o’ flowers. . .

All this Elizabeth remembered vividly while she preoccupiedly undid the laces of her other shoe, drew it off and pulled the circular garters supporting her heavy-ribbed stockings around her legs. She wondered whether she would find flower seeds for next year’s planting in the house.

Meanwhile Mary and Anne had busied themselves exploring the outbuildings, chattering wonderment and delight at many of their findings. Passing through the garden, now filling with weeds, Mary noticed the purple tops of turnips and uprooting two passed one to Anne. Polishing these on their aprons they gnawed them as they took inventory of their new estate. Anne, who had looked after the hen roosts at home, with difficulty counted the flock

of fine white leghorns which had been a source of prideful profit to Susan. In the intervening time Sachenal’s farmer had fed the hens, taking the eggs for his trouble in driving over from his farm twice daily. Ticking off each hen on a finger Anne computed that they were now the owners of fifty-three hens and four cocks. Her pleasure was further augmented by the discovery of a brooding hen. “A new hatching soon there will be and eight more will we have if all right goes,” she remarked. As she investigated the nests she gathered the eggs until her apron contained several dozen.

Mary wandered into the tool shed and with uncertain hands swung a cradled scythe experimentally. Marson had none of such on his farm and the girls were unaccustomed to the management of the heavier tool. There too she found one of the new plows and a clumsy machine designed for harrowing. Turning to Anne she said in puzzled amazement, “It wonders me now what Aunt Susan paid for these once. Pop he says hoes we should use to get most our land out of but Susan she was no fool

and it fuddles me to think she would spend her money with foolishment, huh?”

The soft whinny of a horse attracted them to look into the stalls opening off the tool sheds. Both of them had driven behind Susan’s trotters but these had been willed to a cousin and only Jacob and Cornelius, two fine tempered workhorses, shared the aromatic stalls. Moses, a mule, had been

Marson's only heritage from Susan who had not been above a crude but personally satisfactory humor. Mary and Anne spent some time petting the horses and the three Holstein cows, good milk and butter producers.

At last weary of the satisfaction of possessions they turned toward the house through the dusk carrying a lantern they had found in the bam. Overhead a full moon offered kindly prophecy and Anne commented to Mary, "The moon is full. That, too, is good for Blind Pete says that good 'hex' rides with the moon when she is full."

Elizabeth was still sitting on the stoop, her feet tucked under her for warmth, her skirts billowing down over the stairs, her bustle crushed where her back leaned against the porch pillar. Slowly she

turned her head to greet her sisters while her finger pointed toward the high hills to the north.

"See," she said, "the hexen are out to-night and Hexenkopf is on fire. It minds me now that mom said we should shutter up tight but not shutters even can keep out the hex if it wants in."

Glowing with the deflected radiance of the pregnant moon, Hexenkopf thrust its bulk into the eye, shining almost brilliantly against the obscure, murky clot of surrounding trees. Surfaced with mica it mirrored a phosphorescent gleam that would increase in brilliance as the moon crept slowly down the sky. Weighing several tons, of irregular shape, its surface marred in places by the inroads of curious vandals, it must have had a diamond-like attraction save for the superstitions which festooned its sides, spreading slow tentacles into the entire Township. Here those to whom the power of hex was inherent were reputed to foregather, massed evil to work unholy, incantated wills upon sleeping farmers, their livestock, and all animate possessions.

Commonly an hexen was one said to be possessed of diabolic powers that could by the worshipper's

propitiation be influential for good. Those who scoffed admitted that these strange persons had a power conferred upon them by the believer's faith. Eric Sachenal, father of the lawyer, had been of these. Owner of the land upon which Hexenkopf stood, he had cleared the site and attempted to cultivate the ground. Foods refused to grow there and unwilling to concede

the battle to the powers of darkness he had planted an orchard. No orchard in the county had been given such care; men labored in it with real belligerency; Sachenal imported foreign seedlings and boasted of the luscious fruit he would eat from hexened ground.

And then one night James, his only son, last born of twelve children, had been taken ill. Servants were sent to Doctor Spencer at Riegelsville, urging all possible speed. The women had collected their store of folk remedies and tried them to no purpose. Spencer arrived after midnight and battled until dawn, bleeding the sinking lad twice in his unlearned desperation. Breaking day found him admitting defeat, meeting Eric's curses stolidly.

Softly but authoritatively the Grandam Sachenal

had said, "Send for Captain Saylor, son, these be powers of darkness against which we contend; only an hexen can prevail." Eric had looked long and earnestly at his mother, remembering her father's distant London parish, and wondered that she should have given ear to the strange superstitions of a new country.

"Be done, mother," he replied with more annoyance than he had ever permitted himself before. "Surely you do not believe in this unlettered fool with his talk of some strange book of Moses, his box of charms, and weird passing of the hands?"

"Our belief does not matter now—only that a son shall remain to the Sachenals. Your father died in England, Eric, before your uncle adventured here and from him I had many odd tales of the power of these hexen folk. If truth must be between us, son, I know not what I believe, only nothing must stand between this child and possible recovery. See, he breathes with difficulty, he sweats as do those about to die, please.…" Her aged voice broke, her hands, shadowed by dower lace, supplicated where her pride would have commanded.

"It shall never be said that I sent for Saylor," Eric muttered, his wearied eyes caressing the scarce living adolescent. Twelve years old and well favored, a gentleman's son, of a line of gentlemen who had married in good taste rather than passion, James Sachenal, later to be a robed Superior Court Justice of the Commonwealth, was then a most sick small boy. His face was delicately white beneath the flaxen curls, his eyelids purpled, his lips

puffily colorless. Eric Sachenal looked toward his wife, well past forty now, unpromising as a mother of sons. He knew he could not see this child die; he would not send for Saylor.

Pacing the room, his thumbs caught in his waistcoat pockets, his fingers beating a tuneless rhythm on his abdomen, he recalled the man, one of several hex practitioners, with repugnance. At court in Easton he had openly expressed his contempt of this man; in the Legislature he had offered a bill against "all these who practice magic by whatever name they pass, whether or no they hide under the benign cloak of our Christian faith." He remembered wrathfully that his most bitter opponent, the one individual

most responsible for the failure of the measure, had been the illiterate Lutheran clergyman of a country parish, who had confused the rural members with his talk of miracles, of "white" magic, of the laying on of hands as commanded by St. Paul. Almost the defeat of that bill had cost Sachenal his Episcopal convictions.

His paternal responsibilities surged in upon him again. He forgot the ignoble rejection of his brilliant, scathing address before the Legislature, the violence of his denunciation of Saylor on court days, his fastidious horror of the grimy, uncouth wizard. His son was dying; he felt intuitively that this was a fact, that nothing else mattered, and with brimming eyes conceded to his mother, "Do you, madame, as you want; I can have no part in this folly of women and farm servants. But perchance there may be healing. ... I know not what I say! Do what you wish, with haste." And he hurried from the room to his library where he gazed vacantly into the fire, ashamed of his surrender but unwilling to countermand his explicit permission.

Perhaps because he had more faith in the hexen's

power than in that of the physician the messenger dispatched for Saylor made excellent time and within the hour the hexen entered the house, his eyes darting furtively over the assembled family and servants.

Speaking thickly he demanded, "With the lad I must alone be or the power from me will go. Let no one in." On these words he passed into the lad's room arrogantly motioning the stricken mother to leave the bedside.

Sobbing softly she reluctantly relinquished Jimmie's hand and joined her husband.

Of what happened in the sick room peeping servants retailed varying stories. One maid swore that through the large-mouthed keyhole she had seen the hexen bring down fire from Heaven while a footman swore that the old hexen, a private in the Revolutionary war, had twisted the boy's head upon his shoulders until it had faced his shoulder blades. All of the stories differed widely and none of the versions could be authenticated. Sachenal, impatient of the incantations that must preface the cure, fearful of the human malice of the hexen, and distrustful of the result, approached the door several times.

He was deterred from entering by the expression of hope that beatified his mother's face and the facially evident belief of the servants. Returning to the library he muttered to his wife, "It can do no more harm and pray God …but God can have no traffic with such as these be." And he had sunk dejectedly into a chair.

More than half an hour after his entrance Captain Saylor emerged, his bent shoulders impressively straightened, a calculated look of awe upon his lined, unshaven face, his eyes vacuous. Imperiously he spoke, "Take me to the unbeliever, Eric Sachenal, whose son will live." His assurance of speech and manner found ready obedience. Ushered into the library he waited, ominously quiet, until Madam Sachenal passed from the room. Left alone with the master of the house his tongue gave voice to strange words, half of threat, half of promise. When he finally left Sachenal remained closeted for over an hour not even leaving his study to inquire after his son and heir. When he made his appearance in the sick room he seemed to have accepted the cure as already accomplished and quite complete. Undoubtedly

the lad made a rapid recovery and within the week was again at play with his companions.

Eric Sachenal was never known again to give an opinion on hexen and their practices. He avoided Saylor as much as possible and his neighbors noted that work on the Hexenkopf orchard was discontinued. As soon as his son was old enough he trained him rigidly in logic, throwing all

possible doubt on the mystical and even directing his attention cautiously to the Biblical miracles. Nor from that time forth was Sachenal seen in his pew in St. Andrew's Church from the vestry of which he resigned "in absentia."

Upon his death it was found he had directed that his tombstone should be hewn from the Hexenkopf itself. Local stonemasons refusing, it was found necessary to import craftsmen from Philadelphia to gratify his request. It rested over his grave in the Robbsville cemetery (for he was cousin by marriage to this founding family) disintegrating slowly until later generations, annoyed at the crude irregularity of the marker, replaced it with the marble shaft which stands there now.

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Over thirty years had intervened since the death of Eric Sachenal but his son had made no effort to continue the cultivation of the abandoned orchard. Slowly with foliage accretions the forest had reclaimed it until it rose with harsh strength from the soft balsamic boughs of cedars, its base wreathed with ground ivy, its crannies welcoming the warmth of columbine. Sachenal's experience had but confirmed its potency; it was mantled with ever changing skies and persistent faith.

Saylor too had passed but the new hexen to whom he had passed his power was a prophetic looking man of fine figure, good address, more literate, "Blind Pete" Stively. To him the countryside turned in all time of trouble, depending upon him to defend them from the power by the appeasements known only to him.

Turning in the doorway as they entered the moonlighted living room Mary said, "It must be fine to know the power and be an hexen. But, ach, it is not for common folks to talk with magic."

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CHAPTER THREE

BY THE feeble light of the lantern Mary had salvaged from the barn the girls made their way to bed, stumbling over various pieces of furniture and uncertain of the location of the lamps. Perhaps because of unfamiliarity but more likely because of fear they had decided to sleep together in one of the huge four posters. By chance it happened to be Susannah's room, the bed the one in which she had died.

It was a most confusing awakening amid the unfamiliar surroundings. Indeed the night had passed uncomfortably. Unused to the luxury of springs and mattress they had found themselves sleepily regretting the rope beds in the attic chambers of Marson's house. Weak autumnal sunlight focused on the gaudily colored foliage of sugar maples outside the windows when Anne peered experimentally over the edge of the coverings. Pillow shams suspended on

wire frames over their heads, forming a canopy, bid them "Good Morning" and "Pleasant Day" in the sprawling chirography of the late mistress, inked in with red silk floss.

Carefully Mary felt of these, uncertain of their use, only to have them dislodge and tumble down quite burying the head and shoulders of the sleeping Elizabeth and yawning Anne. Excitedly each tried to adjust the embroidered squares to the refractory frames until Elizabeth, impatient that the day should start so foolishly, boldly unhooked the frames and cast both frames and shams onto the floor by the bed.

This out of the way they turned to their toilette. Curiously they examined the furnishings of the bedroom. Never during Susan's life had the girls penetrated to this sanctum. Possessed of sinful vanities Susan had guarded her reputation from gossip by making up her own room and keeping it under lock and key from the eyes of inquisitive maids. On the chest of drawers they found rice powder and dabbled into it as mice paw the edges of a flour barrel. Other

cosmetics were few and their use utterly unsuspected by the girls.

It was Elizabeth, acting with assurance and a feeling of uncontestable right, who opened the door of the clothes closet to the right of the chest of drawers. She drew it open slowly, remembering that her mother had told her that here Aunt Susan's burying clothes had been kept. She remembered with admiration the costume in which Susan had been arrayed to meet her God, a fine ribbed black silk, rather fuller in the skirts than was fashionable, piped in gray satin, from the edges of which stiff, snowy ruching flared neatly. It seemed impossible that she would find anything half so grand in the closet and she felt small expectancy.

Mary murmured softly and Anne let out a little sigh at the variety of frocks, cloaks, shawls, bonnets and tippets revealed. Susan had never let her instincts for thrift cramp her love of fashion; always she had dressed to annoy the husbanded wives of the community. Here then was the fruit of several decades of fashion. To the rear a deflated hoop

skirt of soft printed muslin drooped beneath the folds of a seal trimmed cloak of plaid worsted.

The practical Elizabeth visioned the necessary alterations these goods must have. "So, we shall dress warm this Winter through. After breakfast it will time be enough to take down these and Mary, she can start to make over, takin' off the extra goods for piecin' quilts against the coldness." Dexterously she closed the door against the eyes of her delighted sisters and led the way to the kitchen.

They ate their first meal here off the kitchen table where Susan had been wont to feed her hired hands, eating greedily of luxuries and delicacies denied them by Marson. Knives were used country fashion to cram mouths already overloaded. From time to time they would wipe away surplus food that smeared their faces, using the corners of their aprons. Sticky fingers were rubbed on ballooning bustles. When they had finished they pushed their plates from them in the immemorial masculine gesture of satisfactory feeding. It was Anne who broke silence, "Ach, we sit and sit and so much there is to do."

Elizabeth's noontime visits while at school had

familiarized her with the house below stairs. From the closet on the rear porch she retrieved milk pails of shining brass and turned toward the cow

pen, first reminding her sisters, “You, Anne, to the kitchen should look after and Mary the dresses she should fix. Mind now, time wasted is lost.” On this homely advice she took up the duties of the farm which she was to continue at until age, infirmity, and futility overtook her.

Few mornings had or were ever to pass so pleasantly for the triplets. Anne spent her time regimenting the kitchen shelves, tasting a little of everything she found, cleaning the large safe of a debris left from the funeral dinner. In the pile of clothes awaiting her upstairs Mary found real happiness. Passing through the hall she had stopped to pass her hand caressingly over the broad expanse of mirror in the hatrack. It was a larger mirror than any she had ever seen in the few homes to which they had been invited. All of the girls had regretted not being invited out more often but Elizabeth had compensated herself by a sedulous aloofness, refusing such invitations as came her way, explaining with proud poverty

that she couldn’t entertain and hadn’t the clothes to go out. Many times Sarah had reproved her, pointing out that girls who refused to go to spelling bees, sings, and corn huskings got no men. Quiltings did not matter very much, for men carefully absented themselves on such occasions.

A few weeks saw the new life pleasantly routinized. Only occasionally did the girls discover an unexplored sensation of taste or emotion, face a vital, stirring experience. Rarely did any one of them intrude upon the self-selected duties of the others and when they did it was because of the unspoken willingness of the one helped. Certain minor property rights were respected between them but it was always Elizabeth to whom Anne and Mary turned for decisions affecting their entire scheme of living. It was Elizabeth who assumed all of the work that should normally have been done by men and instinctively she claimed the prerogatives of the laboring male. Her needs dictated the serving of meals, the hours of arising and retiring, in a measure the people whom they should associate with. Her muttered, “Ach, I’m too much tired the Schultzs to go to

but you can if you will,” was, a social law to her sisters. Her manner of delivering the remark was reminiscent of Marson without quite the surliness.

It was four months after the girls had taken up their new life that they received their first visitors. Sachenal's farmer rode over early in the forenoon to tell them that the Preacher Freck was calling that day and most likely would stop by and visit. "Sure," said the man, "it would be hard on the parson not to stop here as his horse 'ud probably turn in of his own accord bein' used to visitin' Miss Susan with the parson these many years."

Word had been relayed so since the parson left his house, until now the congregation dictated his itinerary, his last hostess suavely insinuating, "It seems to me, pastor, beggin' your pardon for suggestin' like, that the Rauschs are expectin' you." To the pastor this was a command more forcible than the needs spiritual or material of some more remote member of his flock. His social gospel was limited by an unending horizon of coffee, beer, and cake, with oases of chicken and suckling pig dinners generally timed to Sunday noons.

Pastor Freck had been called to St. Peter's parish from Baltimore on the insistence of the Sachenals to whom he was recommended by a distant cousin. Mild of face and manner, he was uncertain of the state of civilization reached by his flock and generally treated them with inoffensive condescension. Disregarding the sound agricultural and economic life of the countryside he spent his evenings deploring the "little learning" to most of the select, cultured few. Nothing of malice tinctured his attitude, simply much consideration for his own comfort and a canny knowledge of who buttered his bread.

His wife came of an old Philadelphia family, friends at one time of Franklin whom she remembered vaguely as a guest at her grandfather's house. Later generations of her family attained wealth and prestige by the manufacture of bathtubs. Without exception she sat by her husband's side in the buggy and gave counsel gratuitously during the parish visitations. The men of the congregation resented her domination of the pastor as a bad example to the wives of other men.

Their visits to the Marsons had been widely

spaced; Will disliked Mrs. Freck and had upon one occasion told her so. In this he was more courageous than his fellows. Because of this the girls had had little opportunity for social contact with the cleric. He had confirmed

them and baptized them but he rarely recognized them when his path crossed theirs. When the family was mentioned in his presence he would look very sympathetic and murmur regretfully, “Such an unfortunate household. We get so little opportunity of seeing them. I really must call.” Now he was to visit at their house! Elizabeth was most acutely aware of the social recognition presaged by the call and explained it to Mary and Anne with whom she was dressing in the bedroom that had been Susan’s.

“Now folks will come and visit us after the preacher and his wife has been here. And we’ll get to go places like other folks maybe,” she concluded.

The process of dressing for this important occasion was difficult. Few of Susan’s clothes had been renovated as yet and even to the untutored in the fashion of the time their resultant ensembles must have presented amusing incongruities. To Mrs.

Freck they were “awful.” As the pastor’s wife she was expected to set the style for those more remote from the village without competing with the Sachenals and others of the affluent. After the girls finished they turned to the little box in which Susan had kept her trinkets and such jewelry as she had possessed. After a lengthy debate they decided to wear various chains, rings and earrings and descended the stairs single file, Elizabeth leading. Dressed in a black silk “touched off” with white ruching, Elizabeth looked not unlike the extant prints of Mary, Queen of Scots, going to her death.

They seated themselves stiffly in Boston rockers on the front porch, planting their feet side by side with rigorous decorum and folding their hands in their laps at a proper angle. Almost without moving they sat thus for more than a half hour when the preacher’s opening of the lath gate was a signal for a concerted display of hospitality which occasioned arising and smiling broadly while their cheeks fevered with blushes.

“How do you do, you dear girls, and how well you’re looking,” exclaimed Mrs. Freck as she advanced

up the walk, her right hand extended in greeting, her left arranging the pleats of her wine colored skirt. “Pastor Freck and I just couldn’t pass your dear Aunt Susan’s house without looking in. We do miss her so! And, of course, we did want to see you in the happiness of your new home.”

Having expended all available breath she dropped heavily into a rocking chair and began rocking vigorously and fanning herself. The pastor's greeting was cordial and less effusive.

"We wish you folks are happy, pastor," said Elizabeth as she placed a cushion on the parson's chair. "And glad to see you we are I'm certain and I speak for my sisters too." Simplicity gave her greeting a pleasant note of sincerity.

"That's your aunt's watch chain, isn't it?" said Mrs. Freck turning on Mary who with Anne had seated herself on the top stair leading to the porch. "Poor dear, dead woman! She was so proud of her things, but we can't take them beyond the grave. Good people must remember that, mustn't they, pastor?"

"Why, my dear, the Apostle Paul discouraged

undue vanity in women but a seemly pride in our appearance is not to be condemned," her husband responded.

"Is it right, pastor, to wear our dead aunt's jew'lry?" asked Anne, her fingers caressing jet earrings. "Elizabeth, she says it's ours but it ain't a nice thought you have when you wear things as belong to the dead."

After a moment's hesitation the pastor replied, "I know of no Biblical injunction against wearing the personal possessions of the dear departed. And we do know that after the cruel death of Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, his garments were divided among his enemies and presumably worn without ill effects. Of course, it is a very delicate point but I do believe Miss Susan intended you to have them and having them I suppose to wear them."

As he finished speaking his wife broke in, "But we've only a few minutes to visit with you and what I dropped in for was to see if you would bake a cake for the strawberry festival. Your dear aunt always did and now that you have taken her place I should think you'd want to. Of course you don't

have to but it is nice. And Mrs. Carpenter thought perhaps you girls would help with the serving. It will mean you're on the committee, you know. And, oh yes, my dears! We shall expect to see you at church and Sunday School more often now that you're more comfortably situated. I'm sure

every one will make you feel at home. They'll probably remember what an active worker your dear, departed aunt was and yet they'll try not to expect too much of you. And there's my missionary circle to which I'm sure you'll want to come. Everybody does, even the Misses Sachenal. I'm Synodical Conference president, you know, and our meetings are fascinating even if I do say it as lead."

"We shall very much like to come when we're able," said Mary breaking her silence for the first time, and continuing shyly, "But we ain't got company manners like some as goes and we don't want to be 'shamed before all those folks as are so much grander than what we been accustomed to."

"Why, my dears, what a foolish way to feel about the sweet ladies of the church, your dear, dead aunt's friends. And you are too sweet to give a thought to

the bother of manners. Besides you're your aunt's heirs, you know, and can afford a little pride," replied Mrs. Freck.

"I'm sure my wife means Christian pride," interposed the pastor. "You must always approach life with proper humility and devout thanks to God for his many favors. I'm sure he has dealt most kindly with you in this past year and you have reason to be humbly proud of his favor. If you use this splendid gift of your aunt's with care and a consideration for the good you can do I'm certain the community will give you respect regardless of any defect of manner which is a superficial thing."

Elizabeth had listened quietly to this moralizing and now replied, "You see, pastor, we ain't got much education and we know pop ain't well liked and there be many who have gone 'cross fields to do us hurt in times past. Now we want to be nice but it's goin' to be hard to forget some o' that, no matter how hard we tries." As she finished she signaled Mary to bring the basket of grapes and spring apples and the yellow mug of newly brewed beer with

which they planned to regale the pastor and his wife.

"Well, I know it is hard to bridle one's dislike for those who have treated us unkindly," responded the pastor hesitantly, remembering his own easy ignorance of them before this. "But it is the Christian thing to do. Besides

most of the folk hereabout have had little opportunity to know you and I'm sure now that they have a chance to they'll be very kind and you'll like them. But my wife and I must go on. The afternoon is wearing away and we want to pass by the cemetery on our way home and see the sexton."

"Perhaps before you go you'll have some fruit and a little beer, ach, to cheer the way?" asked Mary, graciously bearing the tin tray painted with gaudy roses and intertwining ferns.

"Why yes, a little refreshment would be nice," said the pastor as he reached with habitual alacrity toward the tray.

"What lovely grapes! May I have some to take home? And your beer is almost as well brewed as it was in your aunt's day, poor woman. I suppose from

the hops at the foot of the garden? But scarcely…more likely from some stored in the attic. And I wonder if you can find a little of the spicewood tea your aunt used to give me for my rheumatism? Most likely you'll find it hanging on the attic eaves. But don't bother now …we'll get it some time soon when we're passing. But as Pastor Freck said, we must be going. Remember the community is watching just what use you girls put your fine fortune to and the pastor and I expect such very splendid things of you. And do let us see you in church next Sunday. Good-by, my dears, until then…And the pastor followed his wife out the gate and helped her into the buggy. With a few more shouted phrases of farewell they were gone. Out of sight Mrs. Freck said, "What dowdy girls! Goodness only knows why Susan ever left them anything. Well, I hope I was properly cheerful without encouraging them to get above their proper sphere."

Slowly the girls went upstairs to undress, preparatory to the evening tasks. Elizabeth still had to do the night's milking. While they disrobed they discussed the events of the afternoon.

Elizabeth alone ventured a definite opinion. "Before, we was just Will Marson's daughters an' we went to church when we could. Now as we's Susan's heirs they come after us. We're no better now but we have money and fine food and a house. And you, Mary, talk of manners like as if they mattered in women of property."

CHAPTER FOUR

LETTERS had been rarities in the lives of these girls. Indeed it is unlikely that any one of them had received more than seven or eight in her life. Occasionally some distant cousins, who had visited the Marsons, over Will's protest, would write briefly. Once Sarah visited these same cousins and had written her daughters in a stiffly maternal style. But most of their mail, addressed jointly, had consisted of black-bordered envelopes announcing a death and inviting them to the festivities attendant upon the funeral. Now in their new status of property owners they were the recipients of much mail left in their crossroads box by Dan Illick on his way home from the Robbsville grocery which served even then as the village post office.

Winter days grew shorter and the work of the farm relaxed. Elizabeth found less to busy her in the barn and outbuildings and joined her sisters

more often in the work of the house. Despite her roughened, masculinized hands she proved more adept at most things than they. Commenting upon her the women of the parish referred to her as a "nat'ral born manager like as after her Aunt Susan she takes." She could not sew as neatly as Mary but she accomplished more in much less time. Her cooking was not as palatable or as varied as Anne's but it was wholesome and its preparation consumed less time. Hers was the instinct of the executive, a hearty economy of time and means. But when she had finished there was nothing more to do save to look at the accumulating mail.

Almanacs were a source of pleasure to them as were all the early forms of advertising. The triplets thoroughly enjoyed the crude illustrations, Elizabeth puzzling out the simpler text, but Mary and Anne content to invent tales to fit the pictures like great children. Many were their arguments as to whether a certain illustration portrayed backache or one of the more select female diseases unknown to virgins. In matters of sex they had a prurient adolescent's imagination. They talked little about it,

both because it was not ladylike and because religious taboos forbade it. But they thought about it a great deal, each one adding furtively to her

secret store of knowledge.

Other things came in the mail. A lawyer wrote warning them that their cows must not be allowed to stray into the Keifer pasturage. Elizabeth could not understand the legal-phrased verbosity and thrust the letter in back of the mantle clock while she should think about it. There it yellowed and moulded. Tax bills, too, were pushed in back of the clock and disregarded. Bills for cattle provender, church dues, school assessments, everything that Elizabeth could not understand, she thrust into this depository. Her father had been accustomed to keeping everything there and she blindly followed his example. The uses of Susan's fine secretary-desk were unknown to her.

Still alien from the community by reason of their earlier life they participated shyly and generously in the various projects of the countryside. Elizabeth still maintained a suspicious aloofness from social contacts but Mary and Anne refused few opportunities

to visit with their neighbors. Very rarely were these calls returned. In general it was a time of happiness. They ate better food than ever before; lived in comfort such as they had scarcely suspected existed; and knew the respect accorded property owners in a rural community where the share-farmer was despised. Anne baked and cooked industriously for the various church suppers and bazaars; Mary discovered in herself a capacity for fine needlework that was welcomed in church circles. The clothes they had worn on leaving home were contributed to missionary barrels as soon as Susan's garments were thoroughly renovated.

Occasionally Sarah would visit them. Every effort was made to give her happiness. Anne secretly urged upon her a share of the egg money and labored long and carefully over small gifts of food. Mary renovated the finest of Susan's dresses for her mother, a deep yellow muslin with a satin bustle embroidered in tiny golden flowers. Wishing to have her gift a surprise she persuaded Sarah to let her remodel it on her, noticed the delighted way in which her mother's fingers stroked the narrow lace cuffs, and

secretly thrilled to the restoration of beauty which the dress made. She could not understand and was hurt when her mother wept gently over the

dress and declined it saying, “Kinder! Kinder! You are so very good but I much too old am for such a dress. Better that you keep it who are still young and in need of husbands.”

Sarah could not understand and did not approve her daughters’ complacency in the face of spinsterhood. When Elizabeth insisted upon her acceptance of a small sum of money secured by selling garden produce she secretly put it away to purchase a dower gift for whichever one of her daughters married first. Only rarely did she mention this disappointment, “Other women my age have grandchildren to love but you girls will not marry but fiddle-faddle about in barrenness.” Mary and Anne sorrowed with their mother but Elizabeth was impatient. “Women who have kinder unhappy are mostly,” she would reply and find an excuse for leaving the room. Neither the sisters nor Sarah enjoyed these visits. To Sarah they were a glimpse of amenities and domestic satisfactions she would never

know; to the girls Sarah’s fear of spinsterhood was a “foolishness.”

But a tranquility fostered in a petty ignorance of the sterner necessities of life made their quiet pleasure. Sarah’s visits were momentary snags in contentment. Days faded into nights of stolid rest which gave place to weeks of somnolent joy. These lengthened into the months that knew the preparatory festivities of Christmas and the soft, deadening caress of snow on plowed fields.

It was several weeks before Christmas, just after a late fall butchering, that Francis Moyer, the Township tax collector, called upon the girls. They were threading quartered sweet apples on candy-striped strings to be hung in the attic to dry against the cooking of schnitz and knepp, that succulent dish of salt pork, dried sweet apples, and dumplings, beloved throughout the countryside. Elizabeth answered the door and let him in, his greatcoat powdered with snow, his earlaps down, his feet muffled in felt boots.

“Mornin’, girls, seems like you’re real pleasant here,” Moyer began, unwilling to broach his subject.

“Guess I got an unhappy duty to perform though and you might as well get it over with. You know you girls ain’t paid your taxes for this year.”

He waited expectantly but no one replying went on, “An’ if you don’t pay ’em I’ll have to see ’bout puttin’ you out an’ I wouldn’t want to do

that."

"What you mean 'puttin' us out'?" queried Elizabeth.

"Now see here, you girls got your tax notices like any decent citizens and it seems to me you can't be so ignorant that you don't know 'bout payin' tax. If you don't pay 'em the State's got a right to take your property and set you out of it as you should know. So you jus' hunt up your notices and pay me real peaceable and we'll say nothin' 'bout the extra levy," said Moyer.

Elizabeth looked stricken and arising suddenly crossed the room to the mantle. "You mean these here things?" she asked anxiously as she deposited the months' accumulation on his knees. Catching the scattering papers the tax collecter glanced through them hastily with increasing surprise visible on his lean, red face. His lips nervously gnawed

the ends of his walrus mustache as he went through them a second time segregating business papers from mere advertising matter, dropping the latter on the floor to Anne's annoyance.

"How much money you girls got?" he questioned when finished.

"Don't know's that's your business," said Elizabeth shortly.

"Don't, eh? Well, if I don't make it my business all the County Courthouse folks'll be out here sheriffin' you girls off damn quick," countered Moyer, shuffling the papers into various subdivisions.

"How'd I know as that's so?" parried Elizabeth, now on the defensive. "Pop never talked nothin' much 'bout taxes an' such unless he said they was a nuisance. Anyways I thought this was our house an' nobody could take it away from us."

"Women, children, an' fools!" ejaculated the official. "An' I'm tellin' you to get some sense an' pay these taxes 'fore judgment's entered against you. Are you or ain't you goin' to do it?"

"Guess you think as what you knows everything, Franc Moyer, don't you? Well, I tells you I'm not

payin' anythin' until I have time to see Counselor Sachenal, so there," said Elizabeth in a decisive voice.

"See him be damned! He can't do anything about it. You've got just two more days to pay these taxes." And the now infuriated tax collector

slammed the door and left the girls to go over the matter between themselves.

After considerable discussion Elizabeth dressed in her best clothes, pinning the hem of her skirt to her waistband, carefully bundling her feet with several pairs of heavy knit stockings drawn over the tops of her shoes, and went out into the storm. Evident distress was written large across her face; instinctively she disliked asking advice, as instinctively she distrusted taking it. In this she was Marson's daughter. Of the three she alone thought of the practical measure of taking counsel with Sachenal and acted upon it.

Six miles separated Robbsville from Riegelsville, weary miles over dirt roads little if any improved by political road commissioners. Now they were covered with powder snow which caked on the fuzzy

woolen surface of her stockings, making walking even more difficult. Part of her way lay by the brewery and distillery which afforded seasonal employment to younger men and women already rebellent against farm labor. The smell of hops and mash was heavy on the air, giving a vicarious, deceptive warmth to this part of the road. Overhanging storm, not yet delivered of its pregnancy, dulled the sharp profile of the cliffs lining the road on the approach to the larger town. Shortly after passing the village limits she noted the parsonage, a barracks-like brick house difficult to heat, and hesitated considering the wisdom of consulting Pastor Freck. She decided against it, not because she feared the consequent gossip but because it would make her sisters more miserable. Then, too, she knew that clergymen were classed with women in matters of business. She felt a little contemptuous of her sisters' unwillingness to "think out" a solution for their mutual difficulty but she would not willingly hurt them. In her opinion they valued the "good feeling" of their neighbors too highly, were unwilling

to recognize their slender claim to community standing.

Something of all this she poured into the ears of Sachenal when his housekeeper admitted her to him. She had carried the wad of papers under her shawl as she had not so long since carried the friendly keys. Snow had seeped through the cloth, wetting them to sogginess in spots. The lawyer held them toward the blaze, drying them carefully before he read them after

carefully wiping the resultant moisture from his fingers. With an absent-minded gesture he invited her to help herself from the carafe of brandy on a nearby table. Ignoring the small wineglasses customarily used by the ladies entertained in his sedate bachelor establishment, she filled a toddy tumbler and swigged it down almost as casually as would have her father. Suddenly aware of what she was doing Sachenal stood appalled, uncertain of the effect of such a quantity upon one unused to its potency. Apparently she was little affected and he marvelled.

Clearing his throat he started. "Of course, these must be paid. I cannot understand how you could be

so foolish as to let them go unpaid so long. There is nothing I can do for you." He dropped the unreceipted bills upon the table by the carafe.

"But, ach, Mister Sachenal, we have no money these to pay with and Moyer, he said our place would taken from us be unless we do it soon now," Elizabeth pleaded, her voice hoarse with cold and the rasping effects of raw liquor. "Besides about such things we do not know."

"I suppose it was my duty to have warned Miss Susan of this possibility. I apprehended the danger but thought that your father or some other man of the community would explain these matters to you. Well …being partially responsible because of my negligence I suppose it devolves upon me to assist you. How much money have you?" he ended abruptly.

Elizabeth hesitated. "Me, I have perhaps eight or nine dollars and a few pence. Mary, she may have a little and Anne some but not much. Why?"

"These must be paid," said Sachenal impatiently. "You cannot treat the sovereignty of the State casually. You are in default. Even now, laws

troubled by lack of precedent as they are, in some states you would be imprisoned for having let the matter rest so long. Go home to your sisters and count your money. Let me think about this and when I know what is best to do I will drive by your house."

Thus dismissed and more cast down than ever, Elizabeth returned. She told Mary and Anne little, intimating that Sachenal would take care of this matter, trusting dumbly that her confidence would be justified. Their placid acceptance of all she had done deepened her contempt and yet strengthened her feeling of dominance. So, she was sure, Aunt Susan had felt toward her

hired men and many others. She could give no voice to these emotions; ignorance safeguarded her from tyrannical expression of her arrogance but in little ways her authority became more tangible, rooted itself more deeply in the consciousness of Mary and Anne. Even in very minor matters where they had been accustomed to considerate mutual consultation their opinions were no longer sought or regarded when volunteered.

Something of all this James Sachenal appreciated.

To him it represented a spiritual heritage from Susan, although, remembering Susan's personality and elegance of figure, he regretted that it should have lodged in so shabby a body. Understanding Elizabeth's attitude he proceeded without consulting Mary or Anne. After spending weary hours for several days consulting legal opinions and citations he ordered his cutter and taking the reins gracefully cracked the whip just over the ears of his trotters.

He arrived just as the triplets were finishing their noon meal and noted with annoyance the sparseness of the food. He was unaware that Elizabeth had instituted a rigorous economy designed to retrench whatever losses they were to sustain.

Sachenal made no allusion to his observation but broke at once into the subject of his visit. "You, Mary and Anne, are undoubtedly aware that Elizabeth called at my home the other evening on business connected with these taxes. At that time I told her I would consider the matter and advise you to the best of my ability. Before we start this discussion I am anxious to know just how much money the

three of you have in hand. I must know this if I am to be of use to you."

"We have a little over sixteen dollars, what with egg an' truck money," Elizabeth responded, looking quickly to her sisters for verification. She had cautiously questioned them on the matter, secretly suspicious that they might withhold something from this accounting.

"That is most unfortunate," replied the lawyer. "I find on investigation that it is not only the taxes since your occupancy which are chargeable to you but those of two years back. I have no hesitation in telling you that it was my opinion your aunt was a more precise woman. However, in the last years of her life she was much exercised, and put to considerable expense,

defending her title to the lands still in chancery and, I suppose, neglected current business somewhat. It is surprising that the tax officers were guilty of such negligence, but Miss Susan had a fine reputation and had paid promptly for many years. It was therefore natural for them to assume that upon demand these taxes would be met as promptly. Unfortunately her death intervened.

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Therefore an accumulation of more than $200 in taxes due stands against the property and must be liquidated before the title can be considered properly clear."

This was startling news to the girls. Elizabeth immediately flung at him, "But how was it then, Mister Sachenal, that you tol' us the title was right when as you give us the keys?"

Sachenal reddened under her earnest scrutiny and replied in feigned casualness, "My dear Elizabeth, everyone makes mistakes! Of course, I should have investigated more thoroughly before putting you into possession. But nothing was registered against the property in the Recorder's office and I thought surely your aunt's taxes would be paid. Come, I am willing to help you as far as lies in my power but I beg of you let us have no recriminations."

As he spoke he found himself annoyed at even offering an explanation to Elizabeth for what was clearly not his fault. But now that the estate was settled he saw no method of recovering these back taxes and had no intention of entering suit on the

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girls' behalf. It was true that the tax collector preceding Moyer had laxly administered his office and that for more than two years no detailed returns had been made on the district. It was equally true that the County Commissioners were complacent. He saw no reason why he should explain these matters to unlettered women who would not understand and would only be increasingly suspicious.

Times were difficult for lawyers. Despite the half century of Statehood law was poorly understood by officials and they were too willing to compromise. Few measures had been taken to protect the State from negligent officials and such measures as were enacted were rarely prosecuted. In company with many able attorneys of the day, Sachenal

deplored the condition but was unwilling to inconvenience himself to forward the State's cause. Only after he mounted the bench did he establish those vigorous personal ethical conceptions which led him to be hated by minor officials and scorned by more complacent colleagues.

"Ach, well, Aunt Susan she meant well and we should think o' that now," said Mary in a tone of

resignation. Anne smiled her unthinking agreement sadly but Elizabeth scornfully sniffed. She did not know what was wrong but she suspected that all was by no means as it should be. Lacking education she knew she would have to accept whatever measure Sachenal offered but she resented the need and the lack that made it necessary.

"Surely you see that this calls for immediate action," continued Sachenal, placated by the docile attitude of Mary and Anne. "I advise a sale of all unnecessary equipment and livestock to meet this obligation. While it is true that such a procedure is dubious in law it is obligatory in fact. Of course, certain other of the heirs could oppose such sale. I have talked with them on your behalf and it has been agreed that such action shall be taken." He stopped, waiting, like an actor, for applause.

"But," said Elizabeth, her brow furrowed, "if we sell our things we have nothin' the farm to work with. Beside we want it not that our cousins and neighbors should know this thing. Our business is ours and no need there is for them to talk about it." Her last remark was delivered with emphatic

fierceness. Marson's training was asserting itself, she was arrayed against the countryside, doing battle for these recently obtained respectabilities and properties.

Sachenal was exasperated. He opened his mouth to express his opinion of her ingratitude, then hesitated as Anne spoke for the first time. Primly severe she addressed herself directly to Elizabeth. "It seems to me that this we must do, sister, if or no the countryfolks, our neighbors, know it or not. If we do not we must return home again an' that we"—her hand indicated all three—"do not want yet." Elizabeth shuddered slightly and kept silent.

"Well, I must go on. But I shall make the necessary arrangements and be back to take stock of what is to be sold to-morrow. Until then, good afternoon, ladies." With a formal bow Sachenal left.

Elizabeth knew that protest was futile. She spent the rest of the day in and around the barns. She hated a “vendue” as only the poor hated them. Either it represented poverty or death. To her this one represented both. She had dreamed dreams, lonely visions of accomplishment, and now the means

were taken from her. She felt of her knuckles and wished she were a man. She pummeled the ribs of the horses that she knew must go. Without their strength these fields must lie idle.

She was not alone in her grief. Anne furtively visited the chicken houses and extravagantly gorged the flock on grain. Elizabeth feeling the same impulse toward the horses had decided against it. If some one else were to work them, let them feed them she thought. But Anne watched the chickens with satisfaction. When the little piles of oats and corn were depleted she replenished them. And then making a wide detour through the clover field on the windowless side of the cattle barn (where she knew Elizabeth was) she carried a steaming bucketful of mash to the hogs and an armful of golden ears. It was her farewell. In these months that she had been tending them she had developed a friendly affection for her charges. Besides, if they were to be sold they must be well-fed, so that it could not be said of the Marson girls that they took poor care of their stock. Still she hoped to salvage something of the good opinion of the community. But like Elizabeth she

was already alienating herself from the contacts she had formed during the months of prosperity.

Mary was puzzled. She did not know which of the furniture would be sold. Indeed she did not know certainly that any of it would be. Sachenal had not mentioned furnishings. He had not thought them worth selling; they were such as anyone in fair circumstances had. Money could more readily be realized on stock and fixtures. Carefully Mary polished each piece, wiping it down with beeswax and putting all her strength into the task. She was actuated by the same pride that motivated Anne. These things should look well if they were sold; they should justify her housekeeping. Of that she was determined. She was the only one not destined to lose her self-allotted share of the joint possessions.

Barren sunshine of a cold winter afternoon gave place to clouded skies and sifting snow that blew in little windrows beneath the doors. Carefully Mary placed old petticoats and pieces of rag runner to stop out the draughts. Candles flickered and burnt unevenly. Soon after eight o'clock Anne damped the fires, prepared for bed and Mary followed her

example. Together they mounted the stairs, their hands fumbling at the fastenings of their frocks.

Elizabeth remained seated, bidding them goodnight with the remark, "I will sit awhile. Perhaps I may think once of something we can do."

The fire in the hearth burnt low, became embers. Only faint light showed through the mica windows of the kitchen stove draft doors. Still she sat on, revolving impossible expedients. Once she walked softly in stockinged feet to her sisters' room as if she would speak with them but rhythmic snores greeted her. She resented their slumber although she was disgusted with the folly of her own vigil. Nothing was to be done, could be done. It was silly to waste sleep. Slowly she drew on her shoes, lacing them carelessly, and threw a heavy green plaid shawl around her head and shoulders, securing it with a black-headed mourning pin. The wind fought her strength as she drew the door close after her. Snow made her blink rapidly as she pushed through drifted paths to the barn.

In solitude she would make her farewell to these loved but briefly held possessions. Startled animal

sounds protested her invasion of the barns' rest. Now she indulged the horses, safe from intrusion. Stars took advantage of her privacy and intruded inquisitive beauty through the small-paned windows. Her hands caressed the horses with a rare delicacy, her fingers disordered their manes.

Emotionally spent, she returned to the house and undressing before the flirting embers went to rest. Not for long did she toss. Her renunciation made, she would face facts in the light of dawn. This resolution determined, she settled into heavy slumber.

If her sisters noticed the trampled snow they made no comment. Each went about her duties as they had accustomed themselves; there was no deviation from routine to pay tribute to the passing prosperity. There were things to do. They did them.

Just before noon Herman Reichart, the auctioneer, bade them a curt "Good day!" Then he went into the barns. At meal-time Anne called them in and he took his place as if he had eaten here for years. A good trencherman, he had "packed in vi'ta'ls" at almost every house in the Township.

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Silence brooded over the table, each one helping him or herself with a wide reach.

Late in the afternoon Sachenal appeared and hastily scanned Reichart's list. Cursorily he informed the triplets that the sale was advertised for two days after Christmas. Together the auctioneer and the lawyer drove away.

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CHAPTER FIVE

AFTERWARD the triplets dated everything from "that sale that Chris'mas." Elizabeth etched the details into her memory, reopened the wound most frequently. With passing years it became a blurred, fogged picture to Mary and Anne until eventually in senility they became querulous over the exact Christmas it had occurred.

Elizabeth remembered it and the holiday preceding it with the ever vivid animosity of relative youth. They had not been accustomed to the exchange of gifts so they missed none of the anticipatory joys of frugal shopping, a feminine delight even then. But that Christmas they were acutely aware of the neighborly gifts exchanged on all sides of them. Without ever having experienced this social exhilaration of the season they were restive with a sense of frustration. Elizabeth's economy program precluded any culinary celebration and, had it not,

neither Mary nor Anne felt equal to the preparation of dainties.

Blizzard-like cold, which penetrated even the warmest clothing, and ice-crusted snow made a brilliant setting for the communal joy of Christmas night. Through the color-checked panes of St. Peter's church windows, silhouettes of happy parishioners could be seen gathering; blobs of black against canary yellow or a deep amethyst told of pleasant greetings and warm friendships. Burdened with the weight of protective clothing the Marson sisters advanced to the church portals like grenadiers; their instincts in that moment were as defensively military as their soldierlike formation and carriage. So French aristocrats of the Revolution might have approached the guillotine without shame. Resolve was evident in their step; they expected no quarter or sympathy; their bearing rejected and repelled pity. Hauteur never knew finer expression than Elizabeth gave to it that night, a remote baleful gleam in her eye encouraging Mary and Anne to a like disguise of their dread of this occasion.

Within the church Pastor and Mrs. Freck greeted

the parishioners, standing just by the door, he with an apathetic handshake, she with a bobbing bow and smirking smile. They, too, were awaiting

“these Marson women.”

“My dear,” Mrs. Freck had told her husband, “they have been so thrusting, particularly Mary and Anne, and with all their commonness you’d think they’d know better than that. And that Elizabeth has been just as stand-offish as her sisters have been forward. They make me feel irritable no matter how I try to avoid their company. I hope now they will recognize their place.”

But on the girls’ arrival both the pastor and his wife crowded to greet them with sympathetic condolences upon their loss. Mrs. Freck found it humanly impossible not to point out that “the ways of Providence are inscrutable but wondrous wise for our good.” Almost imperceptibly her voice lingered on the connective “but.”

All these things Elizabeth was to remember as well as that moment of crashing, crushing silence; of lidded stares with which they were greeted. They had expected something like this but for Mary and

Anne there was no mitigation of the pain. Slowly and perceptibly drooped they made their way to a pew, Elizabeth bringing up the rear without relaxation of her body and with an increasing vigilance for expected sneers. Not for nothing did she know her people; her past experience justified her anticipations of greater discomfort.

Afterward she remembered the evergreen decorations, the palms used only at Christmas and Easter, the tinsel and glittering balls, the cottonwool snow reflecting the parti-colored lights of the piebald windows ; then she was busy using her eyes to detect her neighbors’ uncharitableness of thought. Very slowly she became aware that the service had started, that eyes were being oriented toward the altar with its square-ish brass cross, its rococo bronze vases unfilled with flowers. Words took form vaguely, only occasionally did she realize the significance of a murmured “we beseech Thee, O Lord! look with favor upon these, Thy children.” And then “for the sake of Thy Son, Our Lord, who was born this Day of Grace.” Pastor Freck’s voice was usually without inflection,

lacking color, but to-night it was flat, tired and lacking in any semblance of morale.

Then solemn-faced children wended their way toward the front of the church where the organist passed out boxes of stale candy (less expensive when purchased in job lots) and feigned a jovial voice for the banalities appropriate to his character of Santa Claus. His only qualification for the role was his girth; by nature he was the stingiest man in the parish. That done he retreated to the robing room, which also served the pastor as his study when in Robbsville, and emerged a few minutes later to sound the recessional hymn with expressionless mechanics. “May the peace of God and His Son . . .” Pastor Freck’s voice trailed the benediction toward the front of the church where he would bid his membership farewell.

Almost literally the congregation pushed its way out; hurried, harried “good nights” filled the frosty air. Men reminded gossiping wives of the dangers of drifted roads. Children were busy sampling the indigestible sweets. Elizabeth remembered her difficulty in holding her sisters back until the crowd

thinned. If anyone wished to “have a say” in their misfortune let them get it over with, she decided. And then they made their way toward the door.

Mrs. Freck halted them halfway up the aisle, her hands outstretched. “Dear girls, I’ve a surprise for you! There are a number of boxes of candy left and it has been decided to give them to those who we are sure will get so much pleasure out of them.” She was striving for tact; she had lowered her voice but her meaning was obvious to Elizabeth. She stood with folded hands while Mary and Anne received the candy with unsuspecting thanks. Hastily she led them out and after a few hundred feet turned them toward a side road. To their surprise and wonderment she viciously seized the boxes of candy and hurled them into a deep drift. “There,” she said, her voice filled with proud tears, “no charity we are takin’ yet off such as her.” Mary and Anne had followed her home without protest, guiding themselves automatically by the wide swath of her sweeping skirts.

In those two intervening days before the sale Elizabeth watched her sisters stealthily. She did not

know why but she wanted to gloat over their pain. More clearly than her sisters she visioned the approaching penury that must be theirs without means to cultivate their farm. She rationed each remaining store of food. If

to-day was sugarless or they curtailed the sweetening in this or that dish it would last so many days longer, for so many days could they postpone purchase of a fresh supply. So it was with everything. Secretly she mixed a little lard with the butter, to "stretch" it, as she told herself. Mary and Anne were numb with the social eclipse of the sale. They had not understood the hidden meaning in the gift candy until, alone with each other, they had discussed Elizabeth's action and explanation. Then Mary had whimpered and Anne had stared hard at the ceiling over their bed.

The day of the sale had been exceptionally fine. Warmly wrapped men stood about an area of trampled snow calculating the personal value of the cattle and implements offered. Only Reichart had put in appearance; Sachenal thought it unnecessary to be present. Besides, on thinking it over he found himself haunted by Elizabeth's impertinent queries.

Within the house since early morning Mary and Anne had been busy preparing food for the women who would attend. It was customary for the women to remain indoors in bad weather, near a window opened from the top, following the proceedings while sipping coffee and eating daintily of the refreshments provided. Always after such a sale the reputed poor quality of food offered a subject for much gossip until "sale food" had become a synonym for bad cooking. In fair weather the carriages, buggies and carts were drawn about in a semi-circle, forming a vehicular amphitheater, from which vantage point the women watched, munching sandwiches brought from home.

Elizabeth remembered with what vehemence she had opposed the expected lunch and how, seeing the fear and worried pain of her sisters' eyes, she had capitulated after prolonged argument. For the first time in years she had lain late in bed that morning admitting to herself her reluctance to face the day. Besides, she could hear her sisters busying themselves in kitchen preparations and she could not force herself to contemplate such a waste of needed food.

When she finally arose she slipped out the front door breakfastless rather than go through the kitchen where platters of sandwiches, dishes of cake, and portions of pie were arrayed on a bureau. Aroma of boiling coffee assailed her nostrils and she thought how soon that beverage would be

exhausted. The hundred pounds they had found in Susan's pantry was almost gone.

On her it devolved to greet the gathering crowd. She could have told exactly who had come to buy and who to watch their degradation. Her greetings were short and businesslike, her demeanor brusquely uncordial. Reichart, noticing, called her to attention sharply. "Would you drive buyers away? An' if you do who's to pay taxes with what?" Thereafter she was more careful, tried to infuse something like warmth into the sparsity of words which her trembling emotions permitted her to lend the occasion.

Inside her sisters made a more pleasant impression while serving these unwanted guests. Elizabeth was out of sight and at moments they permitted themselves to fawn upon the invaders. Once she looked in and the girls' manner became suddenly frigid.

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But most of the time Elizabeth was busy watching the bidding, praising the value of this horse or that cow to those seeming hesitant. Sales like this enticed few good bidders. Only occasionally exciting competition would crop out. The bidders knew these things could be obtained cheaply and disregarding the intrinsic values exercised caution for fear of overreaching themselves and each other. Following the public sale there would be private sales with profits to all. Elizabeth knew that the better the price fetched by the individual offering, the less would have to go. She was to remember her insistence that one cow and one of the horses be held back until the final stages when necessity would prompt the auctioneer. This practice was frowned upon both by the auctioneer and the buyers. So many cows had been offered, so many should be sold. With difficulty Elizabeth kept tally of the sales results, watched the mounting total with hope. Perhaps all was not lost. Eighty dollars and two hundred and twenty more to get. There were still the hens, the pigs, and the implements. Sachenal had insisted that something over the taxes and expenses must be raised.

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They must have a residue he had said. One hundred and twenty dollars in hand! Another hundred and eighty needed! The carriage harness could go next. At two hundred and sixty-five Elizabeth knew that the last of the cows must be sold. But there was only thirty-five dollars necessary to close out the sale. Would the cow bring that much? "Five dollars is bid." And

then seven. Seven and …she waited with bated breath. Inside Mary and Anne were watching with sick faces; they had had enough of kindly patronage, they were haggard with restrained tears. Slowly the bidding mounted. Along the outer edges of the group men were withdrawing, unhitching their wagons, getting ready to leave. And then Reichart's voice boomed out. "Fifty dollars I am bid, gen'lemen! Who'll make it fifty-five? Here's a good milker as should go for more than fifty. Bid it up, men, and get a fine cow worth any man's money. Last call!" (He was getting tired and his objective was sighted.) "Going! Go-i-ing. Gone! Sold to Harvey Kreitz for fifty dollars. Take 'er halter, Harv', you got a bargain." And he stepped down from the feedbox which he had used as a platform.

His clerk handed him the list of sales and the money. He became absorbed in checking it, stopping from time to time to bid farewell to acquaintances or to collect the balance on some one of the sales. By his side Elizabeth waited. He finished checking and handed her forty dollars. "Tha's your share. Counselor said I should bring the rest into town with me an' he'll settle taxes for you." Without further words he got into his buggy and drove off with his clerk. Unpleasant job, he reflected as he pocketed his fee and put the remainder into a large leather wallet to be handed to the attorney.

"Then there was to eat," said Mary dully as Elizabeth entered the kitchen, the bills held in her hands. Overflowing the table, sitting on chair seats and windowsills, were the plates and cups and saucers. Elizabeth nodded as she surveyed the litter. How vividly she remembered her rapid computation of the cost of feeding so many mouths. Her computation was one of days of fasting rather than of dollars and cents.

Anne commented, "The parson he was not here an' that strange is, he goes all the sales by." Elizabeth

puckered her lips, trying to frame a supposititious reason for his absence along with that of his wife. She could think of none, found herself puzzled and vaguely concerned. She did not know that driving to the sale the Frecks, being late, had taken the sideroad to save time and noticed the discarded boxes of scattered candy revealed by the melting snow of a warmer than usual day. Their report of this was the seed of the rumor that "those Marson girls are queer." Had Elizabeth known it is doubtful that she

would have accredited it with special significance, seen its prophetic pregnancy.

Together they washed the dishes and salvaged the uneaten food, broken bits were scraped into a plate and put away with a whole remaining pie and a few sandwiches. The cooling coffee was put into a deep pot and placed in the food safe against later meals. Then, still silent, almost shy, moving as one, they turned toward the barns. Just outside the stable the horse was tied to a plum tree. Elizabeth patted him gently as she led him back to his stall and filled it with aromatic hay and the manger with a measure of oats. Much would depend upon this

animal; he must be treated well. Anne was mothering the few remaining hens, old ones suspected of being poor layers. Elizabeth would most likely have killed them had she known that “Blind Pete” Stively, who had bid in the flock, had deliberately left these behind him. “For seed,” he told a protesting neighbor who thought Stively’s hired man had overlooked them. Mary was hugging her gratitude that her beloved household furnishings were intact and was oblivious to the pained loss of her sisters.

When they had returned to the house, and after attending to the evening chores, were ready for bed, Elizabeth said as they parted on the upper stair landing, “Well, it is finished. Now, we can settle down once perhaps.”

CHAPTER SIX

FOR five years following "that sale that Chris'mas," the Marsons were as remote from the community as a carven ship in a small-necked bottle. Deliberately they cut themselves adrift from the friendships and associations of their halcyon days, ignored tentative efforts to restore them after a limited fashion to the society of the day. In this Elizabeth took the initiative, forcing her sisters to conform by a dour, silent disapproval of any acceptance they might occasionally make independent of her. Silence so severe becomes formidable and breeds a like quality in associates, and in time whatever naïve buoyancy had distinguished Mary, and in a measure Anne, was extinguished. In addition, Elizabeth's ruthless control of the routine administration of their joint lives was stifling to the more generous instincts of the other two. It was impossible to buy threads and other materials for fancywork

now; Elizabeth held the bag and Anne feared to ask her. Mary knew by experience the bitterness with which her dominant sister greeted the more succulent forms of cookery, mocked such tastes in those poverty ridden, conserved the pence, pointing toward a vague day of prosperity equalling Susan's.

In truth Elizabeth might have accomplished some, if not all of her bitter-born ambitions, if she had not been handicapped by lack of tools and the inefficient vision of her sisters. If economy of means could have effected it, she would have completely reached her goal. Everything was sacrificed to keep up the house and farm buildings. Susan's clothes had long since been worn to wraithlike thinness, but they still served for all public appearances. In the work of the farm, the women wore the popular wrappers, garments of distressing pattern and cut, made of cheap ginghams which washed poorly and faded easily. Their addiction to these faded garments gave them an ancient quality recognizable in rocks and old stone houses. Age told little in women clothed so. Audaciously, Elizabeth had decreed that these garments must forego bustles; the fashionable

appendages required extra fabric. This departure from fashion accentuated the thinness with which they were always associated. Time was sculping lines in their faces, labor took toll of their hands, malnutrition exacted a tax in thin blood and precocious rheumatism. Definitely and without consciousness, they were aging, had aged more since their transitory windfall of prosperity than in all the years of rotten, laboring childhood, under Will's regime. Of these things Elizabeth's economy made no accounting. In ignorance she stacked the cards against herself.

In the barns her management was superior to such mistakes. Sleek, well-fed animals were a profitable investment, and so her feed bills for the single horse exceeded the costs of operating the kitchen. The barns were well repaired—a horse with stiff joints was of little use in plowing a field. She applied the same principle to the pigs and chickens. The sale had left them with only seven chickens and a decrepit cock, two sows, and the horse. In the year immediately after the sale, she had remedied these obstacles. Part of the fifty odd dollars in hand was devoted to the purchase of settings of eggs for the hens.

Until Spring made this practical, it reposed in the mantle clock, guarded by the swinging, noisy pendulum. But her first purchase was a boar from the pens of Martin Rausch. She knew that the animal had cost her too much, but she disliked bargaining and so proclaiming their poverty farther. Spring saw them with a litter of small porkers and fuzzy chicks adventuring about on uncertain legs.

In the early evenings after the sunset supper, Elizabeth would slip away from her sisters into the pigsty. She would carry a corncob and a cupful of orange grains in her apron pocket. Delight was to be had from scratching the backs of these shoats, watching their ungainly antics of enjoyment, computing their value at the fall butchering. She experienced strange stirrings of pleasure when they nuzzled her hands, greedy for the few grains allotted each. She was scrupulously fair in this distribution. First she would place the corn on a waist-high shelf in the entry, then she would carefully separate it into three piles with an equal number of grains. If there -were any over and above her ratio of distribution, she would put them back into her pocket.

It was with an equal delight that she would play with the newly hatched chickens. On their arrival, they would be cuddled into her apron and taken on a dogtrot to the house for the inspection of Mary and Anne. A box would be lined with old rags, soft from age and much washing, and into this the babies would be put, next to the kitchen range. Because it was one of the few diversions upon which they could agree, the feedings were rotated among the sisters. It was odd to watch them bickering over their turns, and when finally there were three such boxes, their petty jealousy over growth and appetites of their respective charges was pathetic. They would sit on the floor, their feet gathered under them, and talk to the fuzzy little creatures for hours. Mary and Anne were even a little inclined to resent their growth into the ugly pin feather stage and lost interest a little when the wing feathers began developing. Elizabeth was steadfast in her devotion. To her the death of one was an economic loss. She had reduced them to categories of layers and broilers and roasters, and assiduously followed the current

prices through short inquiries of home going marketeers.

Even before the sale they had been accustomed to sell much of the garden produce and most of the eggs, as well as lard and pork from their butcherings, two of which had preceded the devastation. Then it had been convenient and agreeable to trust these things to the marketeering farmers, one or more of whom made it a point to stop by for “the Marson girls’ stuff.” Mary and Anne had even sold a batch of preserves in this way, and occasionally some butter and pot cheese. These goods had moved well, and Elizabeth had demanded that her sisters continue this profitable production.

There now existed no reason to distrust this countryside courtesy, except Elizabeth’s economy, which was progressive as well as retrogressive. If these neighboring farmers and their wives could obtain good prices for produce without the prod of urgent need, what should her determination net her in increased profits? Besides, in this, as increasingly with many other things, she saw an opportunity of keeping in advance of her sisters; in proportion as they

shrank in community esteem, she increased. Township residents spoke now more often of “that Marson girl, Elizabeth,” sometimes shortening it to

“Betsy.”

Elizabeth grew to enjoy the marketing; exacted more and more produce from her sisters’ labors; schemed miserly for both an increase of goods and profit. Something of the buccaneer became manifest in her method, manner and appearance. Her costume showed the unsuspected richness of silken parts against too-long-worn wool; what had been the speechlessness of a reserved nature was now brusqueness; and no pirate’s ransom demands were more rapacious than her price for eggs. Dutch housewives, with an almost Sicilian love of bargaining, patronized her with equity to both, and much grumbling gossip.

At first she had availed herself of a seat on the rear of some neighbor’s springwagon, her legs and feet concealed almost completely in flowing skirts; her shoes hung over an arm by the strings; and her arms thrust through the handles of two heavy baskets. Her hands were crossed over her abdomen, her elbows pressed the baskets against her thighs,

her fingers interlocked strongly. A broken egg resulting from the wagon’s jolting, served to spoil her day, so closely had she calculated her returns.

Starting before dawn, they would drive slowly up the crushed stone road to Easton, usually arriving just as the sun rose. Here and there along the way they passed or were passed by other wagons, and despite the earliness of the hour, fresh, gay greetings were called, in which Elizabeth’s solemn responses sounded like the chorus of a Greek tragedy. She had no occasion for dourness; but she wore it with more stateliness than is vouchsafed most of its devotees. Just below McLarkey’s saloon, the road would be glutted with farmers’ equipages, piled high with provender for gardenless townfolk.

Then they turned over the bridge and up Third Street toward the Square, which like most Eastern Pennsylvania towns, had been designated by Penn as a courthouse site in chartering the town. Beat of hoofs on cobbled street, creak of ungreased axles from which hung smoke-dirtied lanterns just blown out, patter of Pennsylvania Dutch patois were the obligato of this procession.

Elizabeth had made this economic pilgrimage occasionally but more often had sent her things during this prosperous preface. Now in

determining to abandon the tailboard route she set herself a difficult task and approached it with vigor. Refusing to even consider reprieving the horse from field drudgery for the necessary one day each week, she scheduled two trips weekly afoot. Five weary miles intervened between Robbsville and the county seat —miles that were computed by the long strides of hearty farmers accustomed to pacing a plowed field. Lonely miles they were under the indigo skies infrequently frothed with stars. Women of that time, as instinctively afraid of night as children or negroes, avoided such contacts with reality. Red sumach tips spiked the sky on each side of the road; the soft waters of the Delaware did strange things to the nerves. Even robust physicians, building a practice in a field of ignorance, shivered with more than morning dampness when the trip was necessary. To all these conditions Elizabeth never admitted sensitivity. When Anne timorously objected

she replied gruffly, “Why should I not, big and hale as I am? Men do it.”

Increasingly Elizabeth was conscious of men and their prerogatives. Her admiration was the servant of discontent. Laden with her baskets she trudged with stalwart deliberation, wrapped in an enviable privacy, mulling thoughts. Each step was a part of her planned progress to a respect from the community usually accorded only to men. Starting at three o’clock she easily made the Black Horse Tavern, two-thirds of the distance, by five o’clock. Seated on the rim of the rustic horsetrough, she breakfasted serenely. Usually she dusted the crumbs from her lap and prepared to take up her baskets and resume her journey when the first of the market wagons were pulling in. The greetings were less effusive now; there was a surliness of manner distinguishable in even the most kindly. Some refused to talk at all. Elizabeth could not understand this in the men; she expected it from the women, would have felt cheated if they had not afforded her this unsexed triumph.

These trips gave Elizabeth an intimacy with masculine

affairs and gossip that was denied Mary and Anne. With each return to the house she had reasserted her superiority. Mary and Anne gave her that tribute they would have paid an elder brother. Silence engendered of

respect greeted her opinions. Only Marson refused to take Elizabeth with the seriousness she expected from so many others.

"Wench that she is," he snarled. "Much better it would have been if she had stayed to home churnin' and ironin' like an ord'nary female. Then I, her father, could have done justice by Susan's acres. But that's what comes of a baby country. Someday they'll let these fool petticoats vote." And he guffawed with alcoholic vehemence at the idea. Marson never permitted this disapproval to vent itself in action when near his daughter. He vented his impotent intolerance on Sarah who bore a heavier load than ever. To her he announced his spiteful contempt of Elizabeth's industry and frugality. His own affairs continued bitter failures.

Suddenly one morning Marson and Sarah drove up before the triplets' house on the front of a large hay wagon piled high with household furnishings

and farm goods. "Kass your mom good-by, girls," he said to the startled group. "We're goin' a long ways an' it may be years afore we'll be seein' each other again. Guess now that I'm goin' you won't need feel so ashamed of me, Betsy," he concluded with a black look in her direction.

Elizabeth stared at him. "So, told you that they have," she replied calmly. "Well, a good farm you have ruined and a fine wife and mother mistreated. Goin' where are you and why must mom with you go f

"I have cousins in Western Ohio and we'll go there and start again where people mind their own damn' business an' women keep to their place. Hurry and kiss your mom an' we'll be on our way," and Marson took up the reins suggestively.

"Write you I will so soon as settled we are," said Sarah as she hastily embraced her daughters and drew her plaid shawl more closely about her. Perhaps in that moment she had a vision of drab years without kin and far from the countryside of her birth. With a few more words they drove off.

"Hurried pop was an' for why, I wonder," said

Elizabeth, gazing reflectively after the departing wagon. Mary and Anne wept softly and hastened to their respective duties, loath to discuss this uproot`ing of their emotional stronghold.

Elizabeth lengthened her stride on the trip to town that morning and made her way directly to the sheriff's office without stopping in the market place. She would lose, she knew, a good hour of time when the most thrifty buyers were to be caught but she must know. Arrived there she requested a bystander to read her the notices posted on the wide, soft pine board. This would save time.

"Read I have not to do," he replied. "Marson's place the sheriff has for sale an' all the things on it. This time two weeks they have set the vendue. Sorry I am for your pop but too much he drinks a good farmer to be. An' rightful the property your mother's it should be."

Elizabeth turned from the signboard, her lashes wet with valiantly contained tears, her teeth bedded deeply in the flesh of her lower lip. With uncertain steps she fumbled down the cold, shadowed corridor to the street, emerging with the astigmatic stare of an owl thrust suddenly into sunlight. That day her

bargaining suffered; her customers remarking with sly winks upon her unwonted generosity. For once Elizabeth, did not care!

From this time dated the slow, dragging failure of Elizabeth's economic intentions. She put forth as much effort with as dogged persistence but some hearty power had deserted her. The emotional upheaval of her mother's sudden absence made her conscious of a strangulated femininity. There was a groping realization of unknown and resented qualities within herself. Elizabeth experienced bitter unhappiness which she felt the need of concealing from her sisters.

Sensing Elizabeth's worriment and pain Mary and Anne reflected her dissolution of spirit. Elizabeth took refuge in mad rages designed to cover her own instability. A resultant sullenness in Mary and Anne was her reward. She knew a grief-stricken discouragement and secretly, almost furtively, admitted to herself the abandonment of her ambitious aspirations. Now she went once weekly to town and her comments upon return were shortened to casual phrases. She was like a troubadour lover without an object for his devotions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DOCTOR ORAM drove his team of dappled grays with loving care over the rutted, snow-piled dirt roads out of Riegelsville toward Martin Rausch's farm. His gloved hands almost caressed the smoothly worn leather reins in his effort to be gentle on the tender mouths of his spirited horses. His objective was fifteen miles distant over drifted country roads, with high hills intervening, and Cordelia Rausch had begged him make all haste, being a very sick woman. He had sighed deeply as he started out, in part because of the execrable weather but as much in puzzlement over the obscure nature of his patient's disease. Then, too, he had to consider the uncertain patience and temper of her husband, his most affluent patron and reputed to be the wealthiest man in Williams Township. Of Martin Rausch it had been said that he exacted usury of his

own daughters and regretted that he had had no sons by his three marriages to profit him still more.

He would just about make it by midnight he reflected as he drew the heavy buffalo laprobe higher about his waist. He gave the horses their heads now that he was free of the village street, having made this trip so often and at such a variety of hours that his team knew the way quite as well as he. Loosely knotting the reins about the whipstock he lighted a cigar and settled himself for a cold ride.

There was a crystal magnificence about the moonlighted scene to which the doctor was not impervious. Slowly he let himself fall into a mild hypnosis, surveying in memory many matters that in the bustle of his office registered subconsciously. His road would pass the home of the Marson girls, distant cousins to Rausch and related to all the older families in this part of the country. He met Elizabeth often in the course of his rounds. There was a woman who needed a man and a home of her own desperately, he mused. God! What an effort she had made to keep up her pride in the face of a lot of gossip. Odd how Pastor Freck and his wife disliked

her while insisting she was entirely out of their social class. He chuckled at the remembered pretensions of the clergyman's wife and then hesitated,

frowning as he recalled her guileful trouble-making.

"Damned fool woman with a giddy mind and no more soul than a new hatched chicken," he said aloud, drawing his horses' heads abruptly to the left. By turning up past the cemetery he could save five miles if the road was passable. On the crest of the hill he noted the stark silhouettes of cedars, boughs heavy with powdered snow. Stupid, he ruminated, this eternal concern over prestige. Of course, his wife was a Sachenal and never let him forget it. By Jove, she was a cousin to those Marsons! Suddenly his horses stopped, unable to continue attacking the drifted roads even with their courageous hearts and sinewed legs. He got out stiffly, shook the snow from heavily clogged boots and started toward the head of his team. "Might as well wade in molasses," he muttered petulantly, his heavy body sluggish in spite of thick woolen casings.

Upon examination he decided the road was impassable by anything other than a logging team with

a drag and with much difficulty turned his horses back toward the main highway. Here the track was better broken, the snow frozen and less resistant to the runners of his cutter, but it was still slow going. Along the road the houses were darkened. It was well past ten o'clock and the night was so bad that even a lodge meeting would have failed to get a quota from farmer members. Occasionally a dog howled or a disturbed cock raucously proclaimed annoyance. The snow had obliterated fences and landmarks and only a person with familiar knowledge, so thorough as to be instinctive, could have hoped to find the way with surety. Doctor Oram was grateful for his intimacy with his territory. Even the clammy sensation of powdery snow sifting into the crevices of his clothing and attacking the furrows of his face could not destroy his feeling of contented security. He went to each patient's house with as much freedom as if it were his own home. He had slept in most of them, delayed by more severe storms than this, or awaiting the final stages of labor. Often he was importuned to eat with the family and was rarely known to refuse.

Ahead of him loomed "Ed" Stieffer's place, mortgaged to the hilt that "Ed" might sit benignly in the Legislature. Here he must turn to the left and the road would take him by the schoolhouse and the Marsons' home. Just

the other day Doctor Oram remembered someone had told him of seeing Elizabeth at the Easton markets. She had been selling preserves and pot cheese near the entrance to Meutchler's. It must have been a woman who told him, he decided, because the person had commented on the extreme shabbiness of Elizabeth's attire. Things had gone pretty badly with them he had heard and several times he had intended stopping by their place and seeing what could be done about it. His busy professional life left him little opportunity for small acts of charity but he decided to do it on his way home in the morning. Undoubtedly it would be best to spend the night at Rausch's. The snow was still falling heavily and by the time he had finished attending to Cordelia it would be almost impossible to expect to return and manage even a few hours of rest. Yes, he would stop before setting out on his calls in the morning.

There was a monotony about the drive to Rausch's that had often depressed Doctor Oram on previous trips. To-night, despite the snow-induced hypnosis, he was conscious of a keen alertness. Grotesque caps of snow on decaying fence posts caught his eye and stimulated his imagination. Icicles draped fantastically over barbed wire aroused vagrant interest. This intensity of consciousness seemed to him to presage something fatalistic and proportionately increased itself. He could recall other instances of similar emotional experiences prefacing personally memorable events. His anticipation took conscious form in a close scrutiny of the passing scene.

His horses wallowed belly deep in drifts for a moment and then started a strenuous pull up a short hill swept almost bare by the sharp winds. The Marson house was in sight; he faced the southern exposure and was startled to see lights where he knew the kitchen to be located. For a brief minute he checked his horses to permit them to catch their wind and then lightly flecked them with the whip, leading them into the lane leading to the house. Momentarily he had seen Elizabeth's form silhouetted

against the glow from the kitchen window; from a bedroom window there was cast an uneven, broken pattern of light from slatted shutters, long unmended.

He had thought it unnecessary to equip his harness with bells; noiselessly his sleigh drew up to the hitching block. Quickly his eyes noticed the unshoveled path through which he broke with difficulty a few minutes later. A fine crust of ice surfaced several feet of snow over which the wind had powdered delicate lines like the veins in an old lady's face. The front of the house was forbiddingly dark but he knocked with that authority that admits of no hesitancy. Feeble light illuminated the fanlight over the door within a few minutes. He heard the heavy oaken bar, vestige of Susan's day, lifted from hand-wrought iron dogs. There was no preliminary inquiry; without apparent fear Elizabeth threw wide the door, in one hand a candle set in a tarnished silver candelabra, the other extended toward a heavy hickory stave.

"Oh, you it is, doctor," she greeted him, stepping

back. "Glad I am to see you though expensive you be for poor folks. Come in."

While the doctor removed his coat and scarf and carefully hung up his beaver cap he methodically closed and barred the door. Then: "Anne, she is sick. Hot like baking was her body but she sweats now and better she seems though I know not."

He looked at her for a long time. "How long has she been so?" he asked.

"Three days come to-day to bed we put her an' since then Mary and me turns have took seeing after her. A little pepper tea she had an' the blankets we piled over her. Now she sweats an' talks natur'l like again. In this time our neighbors have not stopped by an' word we could not get to you to come over once for fear worse she would get. Mary I would not alone leave with her."

A little of Elizabeth's old scornful hauteur flavored the latter sentences. Looking at her Oram sensed an admirable bravery in emergencies. This careworn woman, devoid of color and representative of elemental struggle with illness, might resent his fee but she acknowledged relief at his unheralded

arrival. Her resentment of the expense of a doctor was shared by most of the countryside. Only the intimate nearness of death shattered completely their frugality. As a result the clergy's funeral fees were almost considered

a fixed stipend of their income. The death rate was abominably high. Higher birthrates, as a result of passionate pioneer stock, outbalanced the cemetery's toll.

Without wasted words Doctor Oram made his way up the stairs to the second floor. Elizabeth followed in stockinged feet, her hand at his elbow dexterously directing him to the right door. A cursory examination convinced him that Anne was safely recovering from a severe attack of grippe that might easily have become pneumonia. There was still some evidence of congestion and he was meticulous in his directions for her care. Elizabeth repeated each phrase, fixed it in her memory, and Mary, who had merely nodded a greeting, assured him with sleep-heavy eyes that she understood. He left the sickroom with more than ordinary surety that his patient would receive proper attention.

At the foot of the stairs Elizabeth halted him.

"Cold pork there is an' bread an' brookmint tea, doctor, an' to such you are very welcome. The night it is cold an' a little warm in your stomach from food will help fend off the chill. For your money you wait must until things better with us go. For this I am sorry."

Doctor Oram knew the damage wrought by refusing such sincere hospitality. He laid down his coat and followed Elizabeth to the kitchen. It had not changed much since Susan's day, he reflected, only now things looked a little worn and the wooden furnishings were less carefully kept. The rush-bottomed, ladder-backed chairs showed the most evidence of decay. Lighting a lantern Elizabeth threw a shawl over her shoulders before descending into the cellar. Doctor Oram remembered the smell of fresh, lime-washed walls and good food that used always to emanate from this door. Now dampness, like that from a house long unoccupied, assailed his nostrils.

Upstairs he had noticed the frayed condition of the coverings piled upon Anne's bed. Meager comfort such scant blankets could afford thin blooded,

undernourished spinsters, their youth definitely behind them. Feather ticks, he suspected, had been sold for food and he would have wagered that Anne's fevered form tossed upon a bedding of cornhusks.

Elizabeth made her way upstairs laboriously, a towel-wrapped loaf of home-baked bread in the crook of her arm, her hands supporting the meat platter. With furtive haste she blew out the lantern, pinching the last spark from the wick with calloused thumb and forefinger. From her apron pocket she drew a salt bag containing the dried brookmint herb.

This frugal but not unappetizing meal set in order before the physician, she pushed a chair to the table and sat down heavily. Almost involuntarily the doctor noted the swollen veins in her forearms and neck, blue now with cold; took account of the sunken eyes and fallen cheeks and silently gave vent to pungent profanity.

Doggedly she began to talk, her elbows propped firmly on the table top, the cloth wrinkling away from their strength, her fingers interlocked. Grimly she recited the tale of their trials; justly she apportioned praise and blame to her sisters; with equity

she surveyed the community's attitude. Her voice held a sublimated tremor of hysteria; the simplicity of her language gave her recital epic quality.

"I could not have felt more honored or more useless and ignorant if a great general were to have condescended to explain his involved strategy," Doctor Oram said in recounting the experience to the headmaster of the Riegelsville Academy several days later.

In that moment Elizabeth attained a magnificence; translated her thoughts perfectly; admitted the physician to a vivid identification with her emotions. Inwardly he felt a demand for justice; externally he bent his intelligence toward a solution.

They were proficient nurses he had discovered upstairs when he reviewed the progress of Anne's illness. They had a confident calmness in a sickroom and would render explicit obedience to instructions, he felt certain. That was much to find in women of their environment and should be an asset. He was unusually busy and many women and children in the more prosperous and less ignorant families were ill. The farmer-husbands and fathers would pay niggardly

for the labor of women who would assist in both the kitchen and sickroom. Surely such employ-ment, at least, could be found. His meal finished he left, pledging himself to see what could be done toward finding them work.

He dared not risk unduly elating them by promises which it might easily be impossible to redeem. Brusqueness disguised sincerity.

Elizabeth extinguished the lights and went with laggard steps to relieve Mary; she carried the air of a woman to whom hopelessness has become a permanent endowment.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FOUR days after his midnight visit Doctor Oram again stopped at the Marsons' house. In the interim he had approached Martin Rausch on the subject of employment for the girls and by him had been referred to Cordelia. Languid and weak from protracted illness, suffering from melancholia and uncertain of her tenure on life, she had willingly consented to his proposition. But definitely she refused to consider Elizabeth. Surrounded by all the possible comforts of her day, Cordelia presented a grim picture, her frame ravaged, her patience ragged. Despite intense suffering she retained perfect command of her faculties and still ruled her house with a hand of iron. The very thought of Elizabeth's forceful personality intruding into her domestic scheme would have upset this woman in normal health; its open suggestion in illness gave her excuse for hysterical protest.

"Fumbling she is like a field hand in the house and no woman for a sickroom," Cordelia had declared. "And bossy she is like a man, too." All of the physician's blandishments were of no avail. It was as if Cordelia sensed and resented his need of a stronger lieutenant than Mary.

And so it was that ultimately Mary accompanied Oram to the Rauschs' farm. Anne was still very weak and he had thought it advisable that she continue to remain in bed. Elizabeth faced the necessity of continuing her duties as nurse and resuming labor on the neglected farm. She had resented without words the choice of Mary, had understood the implications. Brooding she relaxed into a mild depression that in no way affected her sure efficiency.

In these days Elizabeth paid scant attention to matters that had once interested her mightily. It was a long time since she had bargained in produce. With a dilatoriness difficult to associate with her strength she prepared matters against the spring planting. Elmer Huffnagel, a distant cousin, stopping one day in a moment of curiosity and in the hope of buying a few hens was surprised when

Elizabeth told him, “Spring plantin’ we shall not do this year even though ready I be. I feel it in my bones that ahead is a change. Ach, the hens you may have if pay me you will the market price.” Such a dismissal of what had been momentous problems in Elizabeth’s earlier scheme of things occasioned much gossip.

For the first time in her life Mary found herself in battle without the efficient Elizabeth by her side. Her position was a dubious one. Cordelia was a better schooled woman by far, yet to Mary was entrusted the business of enforcing the physician’s orders and the administering of medicines and diet. At the same time her position in the household below stairs was undefined. When she went into the kitchens for vinegar to drench the cloths which were kept on Cordelia’s forehead to relieve fever and headache, the regular servants treated her as a thief in the larder. An accounting was demanded for each cup of vinegar and spoonful of pepper. One of the maids said sourly, “Think that you drink it I do an’ so get thin like you are.” She had expected to eat with the help but she had not expected

to be scorned by them. Elizabeth would have sensed all this quickly and her hauteur would have protected and salvaged her pride from petty indignities. To climax matters it was not possible for Cordelia to show even temporary improvement.

In the very nature of her disorder Cordelia’s religiosity became unbalanced. She talked wildly of the Prophets and those doctrines of damnation then so popular with even the best theologians. At such times Mary cowered in the corners of the room approaching her duties at the bedside only by an extraordinary effort of will. Once a fearful housemaid heard Cordelia screamingly identify Mary with the Witch of Endor and as she fled down the corridor saw Mary emerge, perplexity and fear written large in her startled face.

Two weeks after her arrival at Rausch’s Mary returned to her home for a day at the express command of Doctor Oram. Noting her increased pallor and the apathy with which she performed her duties he had thought it best that she be given a brief rest. Elizabeth and Anne were seated by the kitchen stove, their feet propped on an iron flange,

absorbing its sparse comfort, their bodies cocooned in shawls of somber patterns.

"An' Cordelia, how is she?" Elizabeth greeted Mary, turning her head toward the opening door. Mary closed the door and crossed to the stove toward which she spread her thin hands, her slender body giving involuntary expression of discomfort in a prolonged shivering.

"Ach, such a time as I have been havin'," moaned Mary. " 'Twas bad sure to go there like as I did but now the others in the house say Cordy will surely die bein' as I'm a witch and hexed her have I."

Elizabeth kept silence a few minutes and then replied, "Mary, there be hexen hereabouts that be prosperous like as we were and again would be. It seems not always is it wrong to talk like with the Devil an' his angels. Just this morning I saw an hexenfuss in the mud the pigsty by and this hour gone Doctor Oram by came an' told me to go tonight to nurse Blind Pete who live cannot they say." It was as if she, meditating some secret thing, desired wholeheartedly to converse of it, and yet

feared to lose her personal possession of the prize. Knowing her moods intimately her sisters forebore to question her.

Imperceptibly the sisters resumed their allotted and ordered relationship in the brief hours before Elizabeth smoothed her hair, adjusted her shawl and bonnet, and relinquished her keys unwillingly, preparatory to striding off to the house of "Blind Pete" Stively. Little had been said and that little was commonplace to the duties of the farm and house. It was as recitative as a murmured Rosary in a convent garden. Now, ready to leave, Elizabeth turned to Mary and addressed her directly, "Go back an' your best do for Cordy. She was a good woman though like me she did not. Perhaps in all this some purpose there is we know not an' best it may be so." Without further words she was off.

As the day wore toward its close and Mary's time at home grew shorter she clung more tenaciously to her association with Anne. The very negative qualities of character they possessed in common made it easier for her to find expression for her

fears and seek balm and solace in apparently casual conversation. To a visitor it might have seemed that these two were happily gossiping. They

talked of the work about the Rausch's farm, of the fine linens in Cordelia's dower chest, of the care exercised in the expenditure of money for Cordelia's comfort in this illness.

Only when she was ready to return did Mary say to Anne, "I like not back to go now. It feels to me that Cordy she will not long be with us an' if she dies while I am there they will think dreadful things. Oh, Anne, I am afraid but Elizabeth said back I should go an' she knows best for us." It was one of the few times either of her sisters paid verbal tribute in direct phrases to Elizabeth's superiority.

Meanwhile Elizabeth had arrived at "Blind Pete's" cottage. In common with most of the countryside she had made excursions there for advice and help. She was not surely certain of her belief in his power but she had given him all possible respect. Her contacts with him had been less groveling than those of most who sought him out. On her previous visits she had noted the accumulation

of dirt, the wild disorder. At first it had seemed to her something associated with the magic nature of his profession. But it was not long before she decided that it was merely the result of bachelor housekeeping and masculine ineptitude and she felt a housewifely instinct to clean the place thoroughly. Perhaps because of the advanced age of the hexen she had not associated this instinct with a growing sex-consciousness on her part. On her way to Stively's she had admitted to herself that she was better pleased in her role of attendant to a man than she would have been in nursing a woman but it seemed to her that this arose out of her old feeling of superiority to women and familiarity with masculine reasoning. While she had not phrased it so to herself she was not unconscious of some strange growth in her mental and emotional life and a resulting feeling of uncertainty and bafflement.

Walking toward the village one afternoon this new revelation had burst upon her. She had met Elisha Wilhulm, a finely built man, and he had stopped to talk. "Better you look as older you get,

Betsy," he had ventured. "An' sometimes a good lookin' widower, the better for children an' a good farm, ask you to marry will. Now sure you wouldn't say him no, would you?" His eyes had twinkled as he observed

Elizabeth's blushing confusion; for a moment he had thought it not impossible to see loveliness in her. But it passed with her answer and her blushes. "Think you that I be a fool, 'Lisha, to raise some other woman's youngsters? Ach, my Aunt Susan needed no man an' certainly her pick she had of better than a dead woman's man. Marry I will not. So long have I done without an' too old I am to have children." Elisha had laughed aloud and replied, "Think again, Betsy, women children have when least they expect an' sure they don't come by bussin'." He had no intention of affronting her; it was his bluff fashion of humor and she understood it as such.

But continuing into the village, she wondered about it. He was a widower since spring and five children were motherless since his wife died. She played with the idea. Had he been serious would she have taken him? She remembered him as a burly boy at

school followed always by a pack of adoring girls who delighted in his sadistic pulling of pigtails. She found herself half regretting that then she had done battle for the hairs of her head. Without doubt he would make a good husband; he was an excellent farmer. Indulging in maternal pictures of herself with his children her thoughts merged into the more intimate phases of family life. Without taking thought for the morality of it she visioned herself easily and lustily mating with him. She suspected that she would find it good. All the petty irritations of her life with her sisters crowded to her remembrance.

Elizabeth could not think without acting. She had made it a point to pass his farmgates on her return. She had even found excuse to make inquiry about crops and the children, an unprecedented action on her part. Elisha, his humor satiated and his mind on his work of husking corn, answered her in commonplaces. Her way home had been embittered by broken dreams. In the days and weeks that followed she had experienced a dull resentment, had avoided men lest her hopes meet further

reproof. When her path crossed that of a man she realized the definite change in the quality of her interest in men. Before she had been curious about their crops and other business. Now she was conscious of their figures, the color of their eyes, the way in which their hair curled about

their collars, and the strength of their hands. Avidly she watched husbands caress their wives and resented each caress as if it were an intentional affront to her. For Elizabeth the realization and recognition of sex yearnings within herself was a tortuous affair, fraught with heartache and strivings.

Even the most casual glance would have revealed that "Blind Pete's" allotted sands had almost run. His tobacco stained beard of otherwise snowy hair was deep gray now in contrast to the chalkiness of hollow cheeks. His hands lay very still on the Star of Bethlehem quilt pieced out in gaudy but dirtied yellow and red. On a little table within easy reach of his hand were two books, *The Long Lost Friend* in ancient German script and *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* in a battered, paper-covered

English edition. Over them was placed an hexenfuss crudely cast in iron. A believer in "Blind Pete's" supernatural power had made it as a gift many years before in the famous old furnace at Durham where many of the Continental cannon were cast during the Revolution. Now it guarded his secrets, secrets which he had been unable to read for years, formulae of evil which he had muttered out of a well-stored mind for twenty years of superstitious domination of Williams Township. A slight fluttering of the hands indicated his awareness that someone had entered the room; his voice assumed resonance for almost the last time.

"Come you in faith to me or with suspicion in your heart? To those who believe, all things are possible by the hexen power and the glory of the Angel Salatheel." The oft repeated greeting seemed to restore a momentary strength and he lifted his head slightly as if the cataracts obstructing his vision must give way to his imperious hexen will. It would have been easy indeed for a stranger to believe that this man really saw.

"Ach, Blind Pete, this is I, Elizabeth, Will Marson's

daughter, come here by the doctor's say-so to look after you now that ill an' old you are an' about to die," Elizabeth replied with seeming callousness. Unafraid of death herself she could see no good reason for disguising his condition to the old man.

Just for a moment he seemed to whimper, then, "Come ye are, Betsy, as a messenger of the death that even we hexen cannot avoid. Well, I am old,

Betsy, an' tired and this countryside has troubled me many years with its problems. Kith nor kin I have none an' few friends though many there be who're afeared of me. Tell me, Betsy, are you af eared?"

"For why should I afeared be?" she countered, her hands already busy with putting the room in order. Here were a bunch of herbs and cabalistic scrawlings on paper. In another corner a box of white river sand used in certain incantations. All about the room were his patched and tattered clothes. She could not help herself; despite a feeling of indelicacy, she ordered these objects as she would have had she been preparing the place for his funeral. She thought of her activities so. "For why should I afeared be?"

she repeated turning toward the bed. But "Blind Pete" had lapsed into a coma.

Late that night Doctor Oram stopped on his route. He gave a very casual examination to the aged hexen and then turned to Elizabeth. "There's no use trying to do anything other than to ease his pain. He's too old and has led too careless a life to make recovery possible. If he recovers consciousness do anything you can for the poor devil and see to it that he takes these pills and a little laudanum regularly. He can't live long. And, Elizabeth, Cordelia Rausch is almost done for, too. I don't know when the end will come for her but nothing seems to do her any good. It's beyond me." It was difficult to tell whether the doctor was regretting the hovering death of his patient or puzzling over his inability to solve the nature of her malady. He made no further comment and left in a mood of abstraction.

Two days passed, days of solitude for Elizabeth. Doctor Oram had left an ample supply of medicine and considered it unnecessary to make another trip to the hexen's lonely cottage. Stively continued in a stupor. Elizabeth, having tidied and cleaned the

house to her satisfaction, gave her attention to satisfying her curiosity. Discovering a number of empty whisky bottles stacked in an outhouse she shrewdly suspected that the wizard's trancelike ecstasies were occasioned by alcoholism. In part this was true; fanaticism had accomplished the rest of the illusion. Most of the herbs she discovered were familiar to her and their properties for healing reasonably well-known. Occasionally Stively

would rave and rant and bit by bit she acquired phrases and information on method. Despite a slow conviction of possible fakery she could not bring herself to investigate the two books toward which the dying hexen's hands strayed so often. She had no sense of fear, only occasionally she knew that this man had not stopped living, and knowing that, she waited in expectancy for a reassertion of his personality. She half-suspected that were Stively to recover he could quite easily explain away all her discoveries; but she hoped he would not.

At mid-day of the third day Stively murmured, "Betsy, are you still here?" Leaning over she took his hand in hers and said quietly, "Yes." His breathing

was labored but he spoke with a barely perceptible huskiness, "Betsy, my power is almost gone from me. I must pass it before I die. It is so written and I dare not fail. Bring me my magic books." Hurriedly and with trembling fingers she placed them in his hands.

For the last time Stively attained dignity despite the tremors in his voice. "I, Blind Pete Stively, hexen of the Sabat of this Township which convenes by that Hexenkopf known to all this countryside, do by the angels Salatheel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, and the spirit of the high priest, Sadock, give unto you, Elizabeth Marson, this power which has flowed through me these past twenty years. ... A little water, Betsy."

She brought the water and held it to his drooling lips. He drank deeply and continued, "For all evil, for all good, by the powers of the moon, the stars, and the sun, by those powers given me by Him under the earth and in fire and by those given me by Him above the earth and in clouds, by white and dark angels, I give it to you to use as best it seems to you. By this you will be able to gaze into the past

and see those things of the future, and above all know the hearts of men … know the hearts of men …and of women, Betsy." Here his voice trailed into a weak whisper. He intoned words, the meaning of which he had never known but the practical power of which he had tested to his own satisfaction. Latin and Hebrew jumbled in his mutterings; the effort gave them a dignity above the ignorance of either Stively or his hearer. He

continued the feeble chant of incantation for almost a quarter of an hour. When he stopped life had ceased.

Elizabeth had stood in awe. She understood that by his standards and that of the countryside Stively had made her a princely gift, had designated her as his successor in a strange priesthood. Somewhere in his talk she had heard the phrase “and to give to others living with you the power from you to work the will of angels and devils.” She knew that she was enriched and could now confer a coveted distinction. Elation soared high within her as she prepared to take her departure to notify the village. At the door she stopped and after a moment of hesitancy turned backward to recover the books still

reposing between his gnarled hands. Placing them in her bosom beneath her waist she walked hurriedly toward Robbsville.

From the village she sent a messenger to Doctor Oram and the undertaker. Something of her vision showed in her demeanor and those with whom she held converse gazed at her with wonderment. They were aware of the wizard’s power to designate his successor and they knew that he had not previously initiated anyone. With her departure the word went forth by gossip chains that Elizabeth Marson had succeeded to the power of “Blind Pete.”

Elizabeth turned toward her home. She felt weary suddenly and curious concerning Mary. Her mind was troubled, she felt a need of being alone. She knew that this was very possible with her sisters. There were problems to be thought through. She found herself turning into the lane leading to the house without having any consciousness of the route she had taken or the persons she might have passed. To her primitive mind this was unusual.

She pushed open the door to the kitchen and discovered Mary and Anne in the exact position in which Mary had found her and Anne when last the

three had met. She was casualty aware that Mary’s eyes were wet with tears. Well, they had wept before; perhaps “Blind Pete’s” gift had made it unnecessary for them ever to weep again. She did not know, only she felt an oppressive weariness and a desperate need of solitude.

Mary’s hands went out in a gesture of need, her lips trembled as she said in a tearful voice, “Ach, Betsy, terrible it is what has happened to me.

Cordy, she has died and blame me they do sayin' I hexed her an' the cows, too." Elizabeth's look was far from being a query but Mary elaborated. "Last night when we alone were it happened she died. An' just then two cows dropped calves that dead were. An' when I went to tell Martin he scolded me dreadful an' said it was all my fault that poor luck we Marsons always was an' always would be." She stopped for lack of breath.

Elizabeth gazed at her as from an eminence. She said nothing to either sister as she turned toward the stairs. Increasingly lethargy possessed her. Somehow she found her way to Susan's room and dropping into a patent rocker stared at the wall dully until she fell into a dream-ridden sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

THE ensuing months of the Spring following "Blind Pete's" death were fraught with many changes for the triplets. It also prefaced changes in the spirit, temper and circumstances of the community. These years fathered unrest even in a community remote from the urge of the Great Cause. Around the village store there were gossiping groups discussing the pros and cons of slavery. The Quaker heritages of Pennsylvania were to bear ripe fruit in ardent volunteers. Stevens had pushed through his bills for public education and a sharp cleavage was to be easily recognized in the intellectual temper of youth and age. Men and women who for years had been the intellectual leaders of their community were viewed with unspoken questions. Only the church and the ancient superstition of hexerei gallantly faced and conquered the growing intelligence of the people.

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Elizabeth was unaware of these ravages on faith. She had gone ahead shrewdly capitalizing "Blind Pete's" gift. Where her knowledge had failed she had improvised. By dint of much careful spelling she had mastered the skeletonized fundamentals of the magic formulae. Under her hand the incantations lost much of their mystery but gained a ferocious clarity that Stively had never had the audacity to attempt.

At first she had had to be very careful. Her position and that of her sisters was unhappily fixed in the community mind. Only with constant reiteration of authority did the believers venture nearer to the new priestess. Very early she had initiated Mary and Anne into such of the practices as she chose to reveal to them. Always she was to relegate certain functions of the supernatural power to herself exclusively. In particular Elizabeth reserved to herself those cases of women in trouble as a result of sex indiscretions. From them she was to obtain much of her repute as a hexen. Without scruple she administered to them a draught prepared by farmers for cattle in similar circumstances and flavored it with

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aromatic herbs. This she gave them personally lest their curiosity upon reaching home reveal her secret. She did it with much ceremonial incantation. Before agreeing to assist them she drained them of every

lascivious detail, taking a sordid vicarious sensation from their debauchery. Finding Mary eavesdropping upon one of these sessions she reproved her sharply.

Elizabeth found it convenient to utilize Mary and Anne in the preparation of the much sought after fidelity charms. Of an evening the three would sit before the fire stuffing these small silken sacks with the odd assortment of symbols designed and intended as an insurance policy against perfidy. After they had been adjusted about the neck of the wearer with mumbled incantations, it was forbidden that any of the wearers should ever permit their curiosity to transgress so far as to rip the neat stitching and inventory the contents. Instinctively Elizabeth knew that even the most ignorant would resent the commonplace materials to be found therein.

Very soon after her assumption of power Jeff Streepy in a drunken moment had severed the stitching and tossed the contents onto the bar in the

Robbsville tavern. The group of terror-stricken drinkers had guffawed reluctantly, uncertain of the possible and probable ill-fortune that would follow. Only Jeff's drunken logic saw these things for what they were—the round leaden disk used in weighing down the hems of sweeping skirts, a collection of dried herbs familiar to everyone there, tissue-thin paper with traced cabalistic signs including an hexenfuss, and a leaf ripped carelessly from the New Testament and perforated in the sign of an inverted cross. Jeff had purchased it as a means of assuring himself the constant affections of Matilda Unangst and with a clarity possible to him only when sotten could see no relation between the two.

As a result Elizabeth lost a valued client who gossiped maliciously where it would do the most harm. Sober, his judgment confirmed his drunken findings. Her injunctions against curiosity were thereafter accompanied with much intimidation. In time she discovered that a variety of colors associated with specific types of individuals increased the sale of these charms. Scraps of parti-colored silk were diverted from quilting for this purpose.

As an added precaution against the contents becoming known she planted a small garden of reputedly mystical herbs near the site of "Blind

Pete's" decaying cottage. Here she could cultivate and harvest her superstition-laden crop, safe in the aura of dread still associated with his power and a possible return of his disembodied personality. For herself she scorned even momentary fears reminiscent of the dead wizard. Here, too, she was safe from the negative but watchful curiosity of her sisters, had an ample opportunity of inventing and perfecting her technique.

By thus delegating the less important rites to her sisters she increased the curiosity concerning her own special functions. She had not intended this although she had welcomed the result. Her action had been dictated by her old desire for dominance in her home.

Prejudice dogged them from the day Mary left the farm of Martin Rausch. On Elizabeth's assumption of "Blind Pete's" role the countryside seethed with unfriendly gossip. Professed believers, rote-learned in their mysteries, pointed out that it was

impossible for any of the girls to have exercised the power until after the death of Stively. Rausch himself, bitter with grief, was malignant in his declarations of supernatural cause for Cordelia's death. Doctor Oram was unhappily situated. To admit that he was puzzled by the nature of her illness would result unfavorably to his hard-earned practice; to permit an increased belief in the supernatural would result in delayed medical attention for many. Obviously it was impossible for him to continue recommending the girls as nurses even had it been possible to find employers.

This community difference in opinion resulted in Pastor Freck's preaching a sermon directed at the sisters and their demoniac practices. Violently condemnatory in character, it incensed Elizabeth to a crude logic and expression. Meeting the clergyman just outside the church door she began reprovingly, "Pastor, with us you have taken coffee, is it not so? Our mom and our pop you knew an' by you we baptized were as little ones. You, too, believe in the Devil. Without him what good are angels an' good folk? Again never will we to your church come."

She delivered herself of this in the restrained tone of a pained mother about to severely punish a child and then walked away not even bothering to notice his reaction. Several months later, faced with the failure of his

spiritual discipline, the parson resigned to accept a small charge in civilized Philadelphia.

The quality of their visitors had changed as well. But still folk came in a more friendly spirit than at any time previously in the experience of the triplets. Recognizing the intolerable fear that drove many of them to her home Elizabeth became almost a recluse in her negative endeavors to express her contempt and scorn. As a result of this many devotees were kept waiting her pleasure for hours.

Despite an increased prosperity Elizabeth refused to purchase new furnishings for the house and those who came were kept waiting in the parlor divested long since of the substantial comfort of Susan's day. In time the cold room, with its ascetic appearance, was as definitely associated with her powers as the accumulated dirt of Stively's cottage had been associated with his practices. Their diet showed decided improvement. The faithful made

many gifts of food and the women were careful to be represented by their best culinary efforts.

Needleworkers in the community secured the triplets' intervention with the powers of darkness by gifts of quilts. In leaner years Elizabeth was to realize considerable money by the sale of these donations. The triplets were again in a position to enjoy life fully and with more zest than before but something interfered which escaped their power of definition. It was to go unanswered for several years and then only Elizabeth and Mary were to know the truth and suffer keenly. Age had by that time taken toll of Anne's vitality; a more specious mystery was denied her.

Early in the exercise of her new prerogatives Elizabeth had learned the value of keen observation and a carefully regulated memory. Beneath an apparently guileless exterior Mary carried and distributed these bits of furtive information gathered by her more astute sister. Did a young man inquire whether his sweetheart had betrayed his trust in her Mary delved into this peculiar store and named almost unerringly the time and place of her last

trysting. She may have wondered how Elizabeth knew or even suspected the backstairs source but she never questioned. It was an invaluable trait.

Elizabeth quickly discovered Anne's penchant for garbling such delicate facts and carefully restricted her to the business of brewing unguents and preparing charms. With a delightful melancholy air Anne spent her days murmuring the ritual of incantation prescribed for children and placing the small sacks containing bits of bone, hair, and herbs about the necks of babies and passing out horsechestnuts with a lavish hand to rheumatic old ladies.

Without serious difficulties they closed the year 1860 successfully. Toward the end of the year Elizabeth had been approached by Jimson Reeder, influential Republican politician. He had come so late at night that it had been necessary to arouse the Marsons and Elizabeth had grumbled audibly at her disturbed slumbers. Although Reeder was without doubt the most important political personage in that part of the country he had humbly accepted her ungracious invitation to enter and had insisted vehemently on private speech with her. Curious beyond

the usual she agreed and led him upstairs to one of the unused bedrooms.

The cold, clammy feeling of this sparsely furnished room, unopened in years, had affected him. His voice was a whisper as he lowered himself into a patent rocker and drew the skirts of his topcoat close about his trembling knees. Reeder was still a little shaken by the protests of his party advisors. Waiting outside was one of his lieutenants who had most bitterly objected to this course. It was high tribute to Elizabeth's reputed power that this man was there in spite of the numerous obstacles in his way.

"This is a matter of much importance, hexen Elizabeth, and I must ask you to keep very close what I ask you," he started. "Things seem somewhat difficult and there are those who foolishly expect war. You cannot tell them differently and because of this I have come to you believing you can tell us the truth." Anxiously he watched her.

Elizabeth recognized the extraordinary combination of circumstances that must have conspired to bring this man at this hour to her home. Astutely

she played for time. Half closing her eyes and affecting complete abstraction she began murmuring the words of her ritual. Carefully studying her man she decided that unless he seriously anticipated war he

would not have sought her out. On the other hand if there should be no difficulty her reputation was endangered.

Her senses throbbed at the importance of the decision she was called upon to make. Subconsciously she realized its importance to herself and her prosperity; carefully she re-evaluated her intuitions and experiencing a sudden elation not new in her role of prophetess rose and drew herself to her full height. “By the angels, an’ Lord Beelzebub, there will be war. That is all.” She feared further questioning and had intentionally tried to avoid it. But she was completely startled when without more words Reeder hastily took up his hat and left. Only after he was gone did she realize that he had left no honorarium for her services. Cursing him she retired. Months later cleaning this room Anne discovered a change purse containing ten gold coins and took it to Elizabeth. But by that time Elizabeth had learned the cash value of that decision.

CHAPTER TEN

LINCOLN'S call for volunteers on April 15, 1861, marked a new era for Elizabeth and sjsters. Isolated from community interests and limited in their ability for social intercourse, they remained unaware of the situation until the sudden invasion of fear-maddened mothers seeking supernatural assurance of safety for foolhardy sons. In the four years of grief and terror that were to assault the country's consciousness the Marson girls were to be spectators, only Elizabeth exercising a limited interest. Her interest was dictated by a need of constantly fresh material with which to placate the increasingly diverse and difficult queries directed at her. Her emotions stood aside.

Even when the youths from the surrounding farms marched down the dusty dirt roads to the crude rhythm of amateur drummers Elizabeth was unmoved. Day after day their mothers sought her out

and made extravagant offers for some promise of their return. At first it had been easy to do this but as time wore on and lists of dead and wounded were available in the village she realized the folly of continuing.

'After careful consideration she evolved a formula that was in part based upon the words of a traveling evangelist with whom she had talked in one of her now rare visits to Easton. Callously he had told her that fifty per cent of these men were fated to die, that this was beyond the power of God and was a visitation for the stupidity of human vanity. He had not known her and had been a little the worse for liquor. It is to be doubted that his remarks would have changed had he known.

At first she had alternated, telling this mother that her son would return, and the next that hers would die. A sharp decline in contributions resulted and forced Elizabeth to adopt a noncommittal attitude. Now the numbers that came were far too many to permit of an involved incantation; a brief invocation to the governing angels was all that was possible.

These anxious women came on foot and in carriages; they were representatives of a universal maternal urge. When stern husbands, immersed in the serious business of conducting a war, forbade worried

wives to pay financial tribute to the hexen, the women gave their jewelry. Of this Elizabeth retained some but sold most to a jeweler in Easton with whom she made a good bargain, resurrecting her old marketing tactics to serve a new cause.

The exigencies of war made it almost impossible to secure coffee, sugar and meats. Even in the best families of the county chicory was roasted and ground as a substitute for coffee and later roasted rye was extensively used. The Marson girls continued to enjoy the best available coffee, adequate sugar and meat.

As a result of this extravagant tribute to her power Elizabeth relaxed her frugality and began indulging extravagant tastes that were later to contribute to her downfall. Clothes, long neglected, were again carefully considered and the sisters presented a fashionable appearance on those occasions when they went out. That these extravagances in

any way compensated them for the vague and inexplicable yearning which they tried to disguise one from the other there was no evidence. Elizabeth and Mary gained weight, became almost stout, their complexions improved and Elizabeth relaxed to an austere geniality.

This good humor took a maternal turn. Of an afternoon when the mood was on her she would walk into the village. There Elizabeth visited a candy shop kept by a niece of “Blind Pete” and well supplied with sticky, indigestible sweets, she would trudge back to her home. As the children were returning from school she would stand at the gate distributing her gifts. She gave more often to boys than to girls, particularly liking one youngster, the son of the Reverend Mr. Stone, a Methodist clergyman.

To her offer of a piece of gingerbread this tow-headed boy of twelve had replied, “Pop, he says all things from you come of the devil. Did he bake this gingerbread?” Elizabeth had laughed dryly and responded, “No devil had a hand in this and your father you may tell so. Ach, be a nice kinder an’ take it. What curly hair you have, just like I would

wish a boy of my own to have.” He had stood defiantly, “But I wouldn’t want to be your boy because you’re ugly an’ old an’ a witch an’ mom she says best it is not to go near you.” For a moment Elizabeth winced under his blue-eyed stare and then offered it to another youth who accepted with

thanks. Dainties were few and the children enhanced Elizabeth's goodwill by telling of her generosity. After this experience she stopped but often she watched the Stone boy wistfully.

Always the sisters knew themselves to be set aside in their contact with others. The devotees addressed them fawningly; those who scoffed ignored them. Loneliness resulted and they knew no way of mitigating it. Now in those times when they were alone they sat with folded hands and silent tongues. A maid did the work of the house but the farm had been permitted to fall into decay. There was no longer place for it in Elizabeth's scheme of things. She was too prosperous to bother accounting for the cost of eggs and butter. Milk was a gift from a believing farmer.

Mary and Anne were a little discontented at this

curtailing of the functions of their housewifery. Mary complained to Elizabeth, "Better food could I make with less waste than does this girl and no cost there would be for the work. Happy we were before an' so could we again be. Let Anne an' me tend to the kitchen. Not so busy as you are we an' better do we like it than sittin' dressed up waiting for folks to come by."

Elizabeth considered it for a few days but decided against it. "Like it not do I more than you wages to pay for a girl when cook you could better. But when folks come some one there must always be to talk to them or away they will go. The hired girl, she stays but dressed up you need not be. Come they will now an' it matters not how we dress." With this her sisters had to agree. But from time to time Anne slipped away and weeded a little in the garden or busied herself in preparing some dainty. She found it difficult to be always on exhibition; she wanted to escape the stream of visitors and endless questions which Elizabeth and Mary seemed to take more calmly. And she admitted to herself the desire to gossip in friendly fashion with other women.

Now it was impossible, her simplest remarks were the utterance of a minor oracle.

One problem Anne did not share with her sisters. The years had raped her of any desire or capacity for sex. She went her way without being conscious of any urge for the companionship of men. Increasingly she was aware of a change in Elizabeth. Once entering a room where Elizabeth was

closeted with a young farmer she had withdrawn in confusion. She had found her sister holding the youth's hands between hers and the conversation had not conformed with any of the rituals she knew. Careful consideration of this made Anne more acutely observant than she had ever been. Her moral values were conventional; she was concerned over the behavior of her sister.

Elizabeth had recognized her need of some type of physical contact with men. Cannily she devised a system whereby this might be accomplished without endangering her reputation. For herself she had no illusions but she knew she must be above suspicion in the minds of those who sought her services. Having settled upon a plan she was not long in

putting it into execution. A young mill hand sought her out to inquire after the health of the girl to whom he was promised. It was Elizabeth's opportunity and he was not unprepossessing.

"Karl, this is a matter in which your help I must have. So your girl is; well, I must know where it hurts her. Pass you your hands over me here an' there an' when they touch where her pain is then will I know what to do," she told him.

The poor fellow was confused but his love overcame his hesitancy and he crossed the floor to Elizabeth's side. She sank into a chair and looked at him. It seemed that he wanted directing. Calmly Elizabeth leaned toward him and taking his hands in hers directed them over her body. If she seemed unduly long in locating the seat of his sweetheart's ailment Karl made no protest. An animal of the fields he was not above pandering to Elizabeth's scheme. But when he would have gone beyond her intentions she was not slow in discovering the malady and placing it where further diagnosis or treatment by proxy need not encourage him too far.

She was a little dissatisfied and ashamed of this

method. But by a judicious exercise of it she was enabled to sublimate. Occasionally some one of her masculine clients recoiled with repulsion at her suggestion but few of them were squeamish. As her own defences weakened before the collective group, who sought her out more frequently now, she discarded the method except with a few who were more subservient than the rest. Unfortunately these tactile sensations were but a

faint mirroring of the sensations her female devotees had confided to her. She knew that in time she must find some means of safe expression. With the passing of months she knew that it could be delayed but little longer. She began only to canvass the men she knew for a likely candidate. Of this she made acknowledgment to herself but gave her confidence to no one.

As a corollary to this contact with men Elizabeth resented the physical contacts necessitated in her work with women. For her there was something repulsive in the softness of their muscles, the indecent complacence of their acceptance of her massage-like movements in the pow-wowing away of their minor rheumatic ailments. Most of the women who sought

her aid in this fashion were no longer young; their age terrified her with a realization of her own life span. In them she saw reflected the ugliness that she knew intruded itself between her and the gratification she so much desired. With men she never experienced this nauseated repugnance no matter how hoary they were.

Only Anne's careful observation had made her privy to this change in Elizabeth. She regretted and resented it and occasionally turned away men rather than admit them to Elizabeth's presence. But she took canny care that Elizabeth should not know.

Elizabeth had experienced curiosity concerning Mary but a sense of her own implied guilt restrained her from investigating or more frankly seeking her sister's confidence. So it was that Anne was the first to be cognizant of a similar change in Mary. Returning from one of her efforts at neighborliness, a little nettled by the failure of her social designs, she surprised Mary in the intimate embrace of a man in the Union uniform. Looking closer Anne was appalled to recognize Eddie Steiffer, a youth of about twenty years, whom the triplets had known since

his childhood days. She hurried on, too distressed at this revelation to give expression to her conscientious protest. A few minutes later Mary fell into step with her, "Ach, Anne sister, sure there was no wrong in kissing the poor boy good-by before he goes soldiering." Anne stopped. "But so young he is an' you are too old." Mary had blushed, "But not so old that I feel not human." She gave no other explanation. A tacit silence was preserved between the sisters. But Anne discovered there were others besides Eddie

to whom Mary considered it necessary to bid impassioned farewells. After careful thought she decided to say nothing and try to accommodate her mind to this immoral departure in the lives of her sisters. For the Anne of this period this was an exceptional tolerance.

In this fashion two years passed, years in which Elizabeth was unhappily aware of an increase rather than a cessation of her emotional tremors. Men of her own age and that of her sisters were dead on distant battle fields or had returned home to be claimed by family responsibilities. Others were too

maimed to figure. Life was making demands of her that she knew not how to pay.

Mary, too, had tasted bitter fruit. Now she looked with longing eyes toward certain of the returned soldiers. Before they had left she had violated her hereditary code for rash promises. Now they avoided her without conscience. But she knew the thrill of a new emotion, an emotion that she dared examine only in the privacy of midnight hours and then not too fully. By all the standards imposed upon her in her formative period it was indecent and unworthy of consideration. Stoutly she refused to let it go. As courageously she refused it expression.

Their isolation was emphasized at this period by a letter which Elizabeth received and partially deciphered. Baldly it told them that their mother had died and that their father, “a no-good Copperhead and traitor,” had been martyred to mob violence in Ohio. Their last intimate family relationship was severed. They knew as never before their need of a new stimulation. Deep-rooted curiosity, fostered by her tactics as an hexen, made Elizabeth seek a fuller

reading of this letter. It was Mary who suggested a way in which this could be accomplished.

“A new school teacher there is since as old Isaacs went to war. A nice young fellow, a boy just, with curly black hair and kind blue eyes like a girl. Him I will get to read it if so you say it all right is,” she informed Elizabeth. Primly she folded her hands trusting that no evidence of her

perturbation was visible. “David Haicock, an academy boy, he is,” she concluded.

Elizabeth consenting, Mary waited that afternoon by the gate at the end of the lane. If her eyes held an unwonted brilliance who was there to suspect the reason? It was well past five o’clock when she saw him approaching. “Come here once,” she called, cupping her hands about her mouth so that there could be no excuse for his not hearing her.

The schoolmaster was but a few days past his twentieth birthday; his figure had an adolescent immaturity and a grace unusual among these Dutch folk. His hair fell away from a calm brow in regular waves and his eyes were a deep blue so nearly a violet that his pupils had derisively nicknamed him

after that shy flower. Beneath this boyish exterior there were indications of a fine manliness that would ultimately make intimate acquaintance with passion and consequent pain. He was one of those who could not afford and could not avoid the illicit relationships of life. Now he was merely a youth who had not yet discarded those qualities of adolescence that make sex indeterminate. With maturity he attained some distinction as a teacher of mathematics.

Instinctively he removed his hat and hastened toward the beckoning woman. He had heard of these hexen and he remembered his mother’s fear of their power. For himself he admitted only to curiosity. To him Mary presented an uninviting picture of an elderly woman, neatly dressed but without especial distinction of face or form.

“A letter we have for you to read to us if you will so good be,” she said smiling at him. She longed to break down these self-imposed restraints and take him in her arms but she knew that it could not be. Nevertheless she let her hands touch his casually and thrilled to the sense of lust that resulted.

Quickly he agreed, marveling to himself that

women holding such power in a community should be so unschooled. Following her up the path he wondered what her sisters would be like. He remembered that some one had told him they were triplets so with an amused smile he abandoned any hopes of finding one prettier. Women fascinated him.

Elizabeth greeted him casually at first and then found her attention riveted. “Too good looking a boy you are to be,” she said with a smile. He blushed and looked around covertly for a hook on which to place his hat and coat. When he turned toward her again she held the letter toward him, “Obliged to you we will be if you this letter will read and afterward shut up what in it is.” Harshness of repressed emotion shook her voice.

Startled, Haicock spoke for the first time. “I assure you, ma’am, I’ll never tell any one what was in the letter.” He felt distressed at her apparent suspicion and his sincerity was very evident. In a careful voice he read the letter blushing at the crudity of the phrases employed in communicating such delicate matters.

When he had finished the letter he started toward

his hat and coat in evident embarrassment. Elizabeth stopped him. “Tea we were about to have an’ pleased we would be to have you stop with us for it.” Surprised looks from her sisters were ignored as she indicated a chair for the guest and went toward the kitchen. Mary’s eyes followed her, filled with a puzzled expression. These things Elizabeth ignored.

The boy gulped his tea and bread and butter rapidly and made his escape with conventional words of gratitude and a reiterated promise that their secret was safe with him. When he had left Elizabeth remarked, “A boy so nice looking will get into trouble sure an’ then just we can perhaps something do for him.”

To this Mary said nothing. But in the days immediately following she noticed that Elizabeth made occasion to walk each afternoon toward the schoolhouse at the time school let out. And once she saw her sister talking with the homeward bound school teacher. On her own part Mary made inquiries as to where he was lodging and discovering that he lodged with a family well known to her

made excuses to call frequently. Slowly the enmity between the sisters was mutually apparent although neither reduced it to words. Together they worked their hexen practices—Elizabeth still the dominant personality; Mary shrewdly asserting herself more and more whenever possible. It was a silent battle and Elizabeth’s strength was sapped by the wonder of her new emotional content and experience. Neither would yield yet an

exquisite courtesy prevailed between them. Never at any time did one embarrass or harass the other.

Throughout Haicock was blissfully ignorant of having become the object of a chase. He resented these old women with the hot resentment of youth. Daily he came in contact with them where before he had never met them upon any occasion. Try as he would he could not seem to avoid them. Increasingly he heard tales of the power they exercised. He became impatient of those who spoke of them.

To add to his difficulties he had permitted himself to become involved with a sixteen-year-old girl, a pupil of his. He told himself he loved her

as he would never love another and yet he recognized the extent of his self deception. A liaison had developed which had reached embarrassing proportions. He walked in fear of discovery, visioned a handicapped future. It was his first school. Had it not been for the war it would not have been possible for him to have secured the position. The board here were unwilling to appoint a woman as teacher and had accepted him despite his youth. Problems of discipline arising from that had confronted him ever since his arrival. If the older boys were to even suspect, it would be impossible to continue. He knew the want of his mother while realizing how impossible he would find it to tell her and how difficult it would be for her to understand. He was thoroughly miserable.

Leaving the schoolhouse later than usual one afternoon, his mind occupied with these matters, he found himself accosted by Elizabeth. Deliberately and without hesitancy she put herself in his path. Without preamble she spoke, “Helen Hoffman a nice girl is an’ a fine boy you are but in such things lies trouble and her father a hot head is. Hexen I

am an’ willing to help you if so be you can meet my terms. But I want not to hurt you. Do not make it needful that I so must do.” The boy was gazing at her in fear. He dared not question her; he could not know that during recess that day the object of his passions, wise beyond him, had sought the services of Elizabeth with trembling and been almost joyfully received and her small stipend refused by the hexen.

“I do not understand you, ma’am,” he muttered keeping eyes carefully averted.

“Understand me you do an’ must,” responded Elizabeth. Her voice had been plaintive before; now it was raucous with the impulse to command. Yet she chose a measure of restraint. Without delicacy she stripped his heart and almost joyously depraved his sensitivity. There was an especial gloating in her odious bargaining, a quality she would not customarily have admitted or permitted in herself. All of her guile was discarded; she demanded what she was not woman enough to win.

White with horror he turned from her and attempted to go on his way. She opposed no physical

resistance but called after him, “This night by Hexenkopf meet me you will at eleven by the church clock.” He returned neither consent nor denial. She leered and turned homeward. Eight hours stood between her and her objective. She was very sure of herself. And a little weary.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SUPPER was finished at dusk that night. It was even more extravagant than usual and Elizabeth seemed to bring to table an unnaturally large appetite. She gorged food without interruption for conversation and almost without even a casual glance at her sisters. Had she done so it is possible she would have surprised the lambent flames of jealousy and suspicion which Mary fixed on her from the moment she seated herself at table and reached for the carving implements. Anne was a picture of bovine contentment at feeding.

Thrusting her chair back noisily Elizabeth arose. “The moon rides high tonight an’ to Hexenkopf must I go. It needs not that you two come with me should. I know well the way an’ would alone go.” She waited as if she expected one or the other to oppose her will but finding no objections voiced she went toward the hall and was soon on the rambling

path that led directly from her house, behind the schoolhouse, up over the high hill to the occult rock.

She was not insensible to the dangers of this departure from her usual course of conduct. She had hoped that it would be otherwise. Going up grade was hard work. Stopping for rest her nostrils were assailed by the heavy, almost narcotic aromas of spring. Her eyes took in her surroundings slowly, so far had she drifted from her reasoned course of observation at all times. In a grove seen through the bushes a number of young men and women were courting. Innocence stood exquisitely outlined in the silver of a full moonlighted night. Even a disordered mind could not have escaped the purity of their ardor. Slowly Elizabeth remembered scenes from the moonlight picnics of her youth. She shivered and resumed walking slowly.

It was impossible to hide from her own memories, to completely eliminate the ascetic point of view imbibed almost with her mother’s milk. It was equally impossible, either as a woman or an hexen, to withdraw from this woodland assignation. Suddenly she knew that she needed this experience and

would have it; that the woman and the hexen had triumphed over all other considerations. In that moment she saw herself with startling clarification and regretted the paucity she brought to the affair. As if in a mirror, the long one Susan had used so many years ago, she visioned herself an old woman, austere of appearance, without any of the sensual delights desired by a youth of twenty. She was conscious of the wrinkles in her hands and face and caressed them with annoyance. For a moment of indecision she stopped short, almost afraid to face youth with her impertinent demands.

As Elizabeth hesitated the bushes parted and revealed Haicock. His fingers twisted and tortured the shape of his hat as he greeted her. “Good evening, ma’am. I’m sorry if I kept you waiting.” She did not sense the disgust behind his pale face; only she saw fear, and the hexen who had been a woman gloried in power. It had even escaped her notice that she had drawn close to the huge rock; now she glanced at it with an enigmatic smile. They contemplated each other uncertainly, both of them unwilling

to give expression to the cause of their meeting.

“Let us sit here,” muttered Elizabeth pointing a bony finger toward a bright green patch of sward. Awkwardly they seated themselves next to each other, her hand gropingly seeking his.

When Haicock had left Elizabeth he had been thoroughly resolved to avoid the appointment. He felt trepidation at the idea of visiting this reputedly haunted spot, and he experienced a nauseated repugnance at the idea of even the most minor physical contact. Involuntarily he contrasted her with the Hoffman girl and bit his lips with scorn and impatience. He remembered the deep wrinkles across her brow, the large hands and feet and remembering felt hot blooded desire surge through him for the girl in whom he had found and enjoyed all of the opposite qualities. It was impossible for him to give thought to his indulgence with her without at the same time recalling sharply to mind the probable and possible penalties for his philandering. It had upset him badly that Elizabeth had known of the danger of his position. Scoffing at her powers

he none the less felt concerned over her information and bitterly resented any tribute in thought or deed that might be exacted of him by this

knowledge. His temper was too untried to yield or appreciate the full possibilities of violence as a way out but he heartily wished Elizabeth dead.

Nor could he forget the nature of her bargain. He had brought imagination to mate with ignorance in his approach to sex; already he had learned at high cost the extravagance possible to his nature. Only a fear of the church and society had restrained him from a more extensive knowledge of these fascinating mysteries. Suddenly it occurred to him that this strange woman might bring to her embrace some new sensation not yet a part of his emotional equipment. From that it was easy to reach a decision that it might be best to placate the Devil's personal representative in the community. He had permitted himself a gay smile as he turned into the woodland path after his evening meal. He was keeping an assignation not with a woman but with a witch; he was adventuring, if he pleased, in new sensations and those not offered the usual man. Only

as he had proceeded did diffidence again assert itself.

Immersed in these diverse streams of thought, neither of the two protagonists to this tryst were aware of an infuriated but self-contained spectator. In the past several years Mary had made no pretense of accounting for her time out of the home and so had neither the impulse nor the obligation to inform Anne of her objective. With firm footsteps she had followed Elizabeth, stalking her sister with the caution of a cat after a sparrow. To the more informed countryfolk it might have appeared that the sparrow was, in this instance, stalking the cat. When Elizabeth hesitated Mary abruptly stopped. She had gone forth in pursuit actuated merely by curiosity; only as she progressed did the real nature of the situation reveal itself to her in its entirety. Consumed with mad jealousy she yet had feline intelligence enough at her command to value control properly. When Elizabeth and Haicock met at the foot of Hexenkopf she contrived to slip gently through the bushes and find a vantage point for spying from the top of the rock

itself. Stretched on her stomach she watched the entire affair, her head extending and retreating in the fashion of a turtle, her face red with strain and choler.

What transpired was a martyrdom for Mary. Words of endearment flowed from Elizabeth and found a sounding board against Hexenkopf's cold side. Phrases of commanding passion, calculated to be productive of the ultimate in sensation were ground out by Haicock, now master of a situation in which he had been enslaved. The contortions of their embrace left her enraged. From her odd perspective she could capture each movement, feast her eyes and starve her heart and body in this greener pasture denied her by her own caution. Her face was a terrible thing; her soul found kinship with the bats that beat their wings against the foliage of nearby trees. And through it all by an exercise of the imagination she had replaced Elizabeth. She buried her head in her arms and wept for anger, occasionally sinking her teeth into her flesh to stifle the fury of her sobs.

Approaching this assignation with such utterly ulterior

motivations, Haicock was fated to know sharp disappointment. His mind and body rebelled at conquering this haggard woman, almost as old as his grandmother, certainly older than his mother who had been married at fifteen and bore him the following year. Finding it impossible to retract, he took refuge in experimental masculinity. He brought all his boyish wiles to work, used the honeyed and dramatic phrases which the young and the romantic forever confuse in their approach to passion and love. The confusion resulting is usually disastrous if it prove to be love; this was desire and complacence. Elizabeth heard him avidly. Underneath an exterior sincerity the prankster heritage of youth found amusement in her willing surrender. Arrogance was bred, too, when he remembered her reputation for supernatural wisdom. Here was a woman, physically mature, to whom a lad had to serve as guide. Almost he laughed aloud.

Only after the first consuming passion had seared her did Elizabeth's mind and will reassert itself. Recognizing that it had progressed beyond rectification she held her peace, permitted herself a more

extended orgy of stolen sweets. Now the difference in their ages stood out in sharper contrast. She hated and then pitied the boy. She appreciated the sacrifice she had imposed upon him. All of the feminine capacity for maternity was aroused and battled within her against extended exploitation of his youth. It was impossible, the woman demanded physically and her

emotional need swept aside all other considerations. Her embrace tightened.

"Stop," muttered Haicock, his hands pushing at her strongly muscled arms. Neither physically nor emotionally was he a worthy opponent. Hours were consumed; he knew misery. She was unconscious of the passage of time, drunken upon a new sensation.

It was well past three o'clock when they rose from the ground and faced each other. Both knew shame but only to Elizabeth was vouchsafed elation almost to ecstasy. He was weary and satiated beyond any previous experience. She had had a rejuvenating contact with life and was unaware of any discrepancy between the flesh and the spirit.

"Worry you not about the Hoffman girl. Fixed her I have this afternoon an' never bothered will you

be." With these words and a vague gesture Elizabeth left him. He turned off by a shorter path and almost ran with stumbling steps the mile distance to his lodgings. He had sought a new sensation and through it been reduced to prayer.

With ludicrous stiffness Mary lowered herself down the side of Hexenkopf, her skirts catching on sharp edges of rock, her hands suffering deep gashes. She was unaware of anything save her hatred of Elizabeth. By superior courage and a complete disdain of any standards save her own Elizabeth had accomplished what Mary had vainly desired. All of the cumulative dislike and injustice of years assailed Mary's memory. Only her caution preserved her from violence and possibly murder. She entered the house noiselessly and made her way to Elizabeth's room not more than a half hour after her sister. Her gorge was replete. Elizabeth was soundly asleep like a man under the influence of liquor. Mary hesitated and could not summon the courage to wake and face her. Weariness and defeat stooped her shoulders as she tiptoed out and felt her way down the corridor to the room she shared with Anne.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FROM this time forth the Marsons' home was an armed camp, with Anne a non-combatant. Elizabeth was so constructed that she enjoyed battle; had she been a man there is little doubt this period would have found her amidst the reek of gunpowder. Mary was reveling in a new found personality, plumbing its potentialities and ferreting out its hidden passages. As a result the clash gave her opportunity. For Anne it was meaningless and she was torn between conflicting loyalties.

Still Anne had wit enough to resent the trickery of Elizabeth sending her on errands to the school teacher. Elizabeth had tried to see him in person several days after the assignation and he had taken refuge behind the wide, brown back of a geography. Thereafter she sent Anne, scheming long over the

messages, trying her best to devise one that would intrigue him into another meeting with her.

That she should bother him at all Haicock resented. She had apportioned to him the dirty business of sex and he wanted no more of her. His mind reverted to the sordid detail one afternoon in a class of small girls and suddenly all was blotted out and he inhabited a globe of blood in which he swam wildly. Minutes were required to regain the semblance of normality but he knew then that within him Elizabeth had awakened a potential monster. Shaving himself he would start suddenly as his, mind crossed a forbidden track and then would suddenly find that he had gashed his cheek with the razor. Because she too had shared this communion with madness it was necessary at times to fight the impulse to return to her, to find again this road to stranger pleasures. So it was that he resented the meek and uninitiated Anne perhaps more than he would have Elizabeth in person.

She would approach him calmly. "Elizabeth, she sent me to tell you pleased she would be if an' you'd call by tonight on your homeward way." The words

were the words of Anne but the intention was entirely that of Elizabeth. Behind this simplicity was an invitation to wild debauchery. Because he

understood, it was difficult to say no. He would remember too that this woman was like unto Elizabeth when he first met her; that within her she had the capacity to flood his dreams and thoughts with red. And he would cover his face with his hands and moan.

All this he might have escaped and evaded had he been willing to resign his position and return to his mother's home in Berks County. He was deterred from this by thoughts of his mother's need of his salary but as largely by his infatuation with the Hoffman girl. Elizabeth had sealed his doom when she assured him she had "fixed" the child. He was uncertain what she intended to convey by the phrase; puzzled as to how she might have accomplished it; but easily self-convinced in the light of his experience with her that night. Backed by this he had resumed his relations on the following night and was now engrossed by her.

Mary meanwhile had busied herself after a fashion Elizabeth scorned. Dropping into a village

home of an afternoon she would sip her tea and remark, "It be strange how tuckered and wan the Hoffman girl looking is just now. An' always about with the school teacher she is. Mayhap something has that with it to do?" Her hearers would look apprehensively at one another and agree with Mary's comments. Later when Elizabeth heard of these things she was to say, "Ach, right it is that a girl so younglike should peaked look in Springtime. Clean her out with a little sassafras tea an' she'll perk up lively." But she could not ignore Mary's intentions and it worried her.

It was about this time she became aware that she was ill. Thoroughly alarmed she retreated to the woods where she spent an entire day examining herself and trying to reach a decision. It was extremely difficult for Elizabeth to face this fact in herself. She had faced it many times in others; she recalled with the first vestiges of regret the contempt she had poured upon them. By the very nature of her position in the community she had been the natural confessional for girls and women "in trouble." Crude abortion was a part of her stock in trade. Incantations

crowded her mind at this moment of revelation. She had never been certain whether it was the incantations with their patterns drawn in river sand or the sticky preparation of herbs she boiled in the same iron kettle used to

render lard. This she knew —she must try to save herself from the suspicion and derision of the community.

Slowly she made her way back to the house. Early summer with its profusion of loveliness meant nothing to her. She knew a need arising from fear and in that need recognized a larger one, a desperate desire for the tenderness of her child's father. She had tried all her guile to inveigle him back if only temporarily. She had failed. But this afternoon she would make a final personal attempt.

Pushing aside the undergrowth of brambles and bushes she cut off the path and went directly through the woods toward the schoolhouse. Having reached her decision she acted with much of her old masculinity. It mattered not to her that her hands were torn by brambles and her shoes muddied by pools of water left here by slow-melting snow. She must see this man to whom she had offered an high allegiance.

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Possible maternity exalted Elizabeth. If he would be a little kind she would willingly mother this child, would even agree to pass to it her power as an hexen. Anything! Her body was parched with the fever of her desire; the palms of her hands twitched with recollection of the roundness of his thighs. She tore through these woods like a wounded bear rushing in defense of its cubs. Here was a more elemental urge, the need of mating again. Through the leaves she glimpsed the school and adjusted her approach to a more decorous walk. She was not sure how she should tell him. Her experience contained nothing akin to this. All of her ingenuity and intuition in fathoming the emotions of others availed her nothing now. She was an old woman in love with a boy and pleased with her own folly.

Through the open windows the scholars were absorbing the mild sun-warmed air of an early summer day. Elizabeth drew nearer and penetrated the semi-gloom of the schoolroom; her eyes sought and found Haicock on his raised platform at the end of the room. His hand supported his chin, a smile occasioned dimples in his smooth cheeks as he listened attentively

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to a class of small children recite the alphabet in sing-song fashion. She was dimly aware of the bright colors of their clothes and contrasted them with the professional somberness of his attire. She thought how pleasant a task it would be to mend his clothes, to give him the thoughtful care that for

years she had expended upon her sisters. In that moment she resented her years of absorption in their interests and needs, glimpsed through the decades what the companionship of a husband and children might have brought her.

Suddenly a little girl turned a startled, flower-like face toward the window. Insensibly Elizabeth had drawn very near until she was pressing her face against the glass with the fervor of a child watching forbidden sweets in a shop window. Haicock noticed the child's inattention, his glance followed hers. He recognized Elizabeth and instantly paled and lost the warmth of his smile in the chill of feared disaster. In that moment Elizabeth saw and appreciated the child in him. She could not avoid a comparison between the clarity of his gaze a few seconds earlier, its kinship to that of the children

whom he taught, and the murky expression her presence occasioned. Tears welled to her eyes, her hands sought her throat as if she would tear away the clot that formed there and threatened her apparent composure. In sheer terror she turned and fled across the recess ground toward the road that led to her home. Glancing back through a mist of tears she saw him standing at the door one foot in advance of the other as if he were undecided whether or no to follow and make inquiries. She hastened her pace. When she looked again he had gone back into the schoolroom. The door was as vacant as she knew her heart had been and now would always be. Intuitively she knew he knew her secret and had renounced her to himself.

Like a wounded animal she left the road and sought shelter in a small copse of chestnut trees slowly finding bud beneath the revivifying influence of the sun. Leaning her back against one of these she closed her eyes against the light as she wished she could against life itself. Without hesitancy or shame she wept. She had not wept in years; the balm of tears eased the sting of his renunciation.

Clarity returned to her thoughts. She wiped her face clumsily with her apron, disliking the feeling, and calmly sought to review the entire situation.

She admitted to herself the folly of her action and entered no defence. Her strength was superior to the fraud of self pity. Had she descended to

that she could not have gone forward at all. It was necessary that she recognize the plight of her position; disgrace such as she had never before experienced must follow any revelation in a puritanical community. Her stakes in the game were lost beyond recovery. Absently her hand drew the pattern of destruction used in the incantation of abortion. Her fingers toyed with bits of leaves and small sticks, her strength and the violence of her emotion lost something of its direction in these customary actions. Automatically her hands tidied her person, the fingers exploring her waistband as if seeking there to find refutation of a known truth. Drowsiness overcame her and she fell into a slumber from which issued moans and sighs and endearing phrases. A passing farmhand heard these noises and investigating

mistook it for a trance and hurried away lest he learn matters not intended for the uninitiated.

Several hours had passed when Elizabeth awoke. The sun had retreated westward and chill had settled into her frame. She rubbed herself vigorously and got up with difficulty. Her mind was as lethargic as her body and forgetfulness had been the boon of her rest. Dully she started homeward and made her way ultimately up the lane and into the house through the kitchen.

"Where have you been?" inquired Mary shrilly. "Talkin' with the school teacher lad again I s'pose. Sure it's shameful when a woman old as you be can't let alone boys just away from home. An' sick you look too an' foolish like the Halpin girl."

Anne looked at Elizabeth with a puzzled expression. She remembered the sniveling creature who had come weeping to see Elizabeth by night with a tawdry tale of misfortune and inopportune sinning. And she visioned the mound in the cemetery which concealed the result of Elizabeth's potency.

Elizabeth shivered and turned toward the fire. "So pretty a day was it that I sat me down in the

woods nearby an' asleep fell. Now I chilled am an' tired from lay in' hard on the ground." She hated her weakness in evading Mary's insinuation but Anne's pain-stricken gaze restrained the natural impulse of her tongue.

Mary retorted with a disdainful leer that could not possibly pass for a smile. It would be unwise to admit that she had shadowed Elizabeth and could account for every move she had made. That afternoon Mary had learned the bitter-sweet joy to be obtained by torture. From a mild and gentle woman misguided love had created a ruthless if bloodless sadist. From now on she would be the concealed mistress of the situation.

As the days passed Mary slowly showed her hand, revealing piecemeal her store of furtive information. Once when Elizabeth was closeted with an Illick from the far part of the Township she entered and said, “Know you, Elizabeth, that the school teacher goes again with the Hoffman girl?” There was no refuge for Elizabeth except to keep an austere silence and go on with the incantation. Annoyed, Mary continued, “An’ there be those who say somethin’

more serious there is between ’em. Just a while back I passed Pastor Freck’s son, the one who farms on Rausch’s piece, an’ he it was tol’ me married they were to be by his father in the city. An’ if true it is many hearts will suffer.” She laughed loudly as she left the room.

Only after the client had gone homeward did Elizabeth give rein to her now thoroughly aroused passion. Turning on Mary as they sat at supper she said spitefully, “An’ maybe not your heart among those are who hurt will be when the lad marries? Ach, if you knew how foolish it is for you to look in that direction for what you have not found elsewhere. Timothy Fox is dead and Amandus Simpson is crippled an’ you still alone are in spite of sweet words an’ a full belly.” Having determined to brazen it out Elizabeth felt no need for restraining her venom. In a fighting mood she was careless of possible wounds to herself.

Mary was certain of her power and could afford to wait. So upon this occasion she folded her hands and forbore answering her sister. The rest of the meal passed in silence. Months were to elapse before it

would again rush between them like a swollen river cleaving an island when snow melts.

August had come and gone and September brought rich harvest of crops and increased gifts to the Marson home. Dressed chickens and newly cured hams and bacon from hickory-sweet smoke-houses were given them;

pumpkins and large stone crocks of home-made mince meat spiced with bourbon and wines were stored in the cellars. But Elizabeth knew no contentment, peace did not companion an unprecedented prosperity. Forebodings of disaster rode her dreams as she was reputed to ride cattle in the full of the moon.

Daily she knew the encroachments of the child on her girth, her strength and her thoughts. Unwillingly she had turned her lore upon herself, without success. Now she was almost resigned to a disgraceful maternity. She had not seen her paramour since the closing of school. He had married the Hoffman girl and accepted an appointment to a school at a distance. His conscience had afforded him some unhappy hours but when he had confided his scruples to his sweetheart she had said, "Let the old witch

look after herself. If she can't then no one can. She'll come out of it all right." He had never had sufficient courage to ask the girl about her contact with Elizabeth. It was not until several childless years had passed that he suspected the truth and upbraided her. By that time his red dreams of bloody lust had passed and convention made of him a good husband and schoolmaster. When he thought of Elizabeth at all it was as a person associated with the absurdities of youth and best forgotten quickly.

But Elizabeth had been unequal to looking after herself. She was heavy with child, conscious of the questioning eyes of the women who sought her counsel, more conscious of the scorn in the eyes of Mary and the pity marring the placidity of Anne's gaze. For her in this period there could be no forgetfulness. In desperation she turned to Pastor Hellmuth who had succeeded her ancient enemy Pastor Freck. A graduate of Princeton's rigidly righteous theology he was unsparing in his condemnation. Cotton Mather was a generous gentleman by comparison. At least he had been willing to mitigate the stake with the possibilities of repentance and a cup of

water. Hellmuth austerely faced Elizabeth, one hand resting on the carved back of a horsehair tete-a-tete, the other clenched in a Mosaic gesture of damnation. Without hope or hesitancy he had said, "Years you have given to the service of your master the Devil and now in extremity you consult me for assistance. Properly I should publish your disgrace in letters of fire.

But I will be generous. The Bible says: Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.' It is not meet that an humble follower of the Master should interfere with his divinely ordained plan. As you are so it was his intention that you should be. My mission precludes any divergence from divine justice. I must ask you to leave my study and take your problem elsewhere."

Elizabeth stepped from the parsonage door with a heavy heart. She had hoped for much here and her disappointment was almost past bearing. She regretted Pastor Freck's removal; she knew his kindness toward girls who had been to her in vain. Elsewhere for her could only mean home. Toward it she turned, her body and spirit laden, her mind stupefied with the enormity of her problem. She had long resented

bitterly the lethargy and leadenness resulting from her condition. It seemed to her that this stage of maternity was not unlike the effects of laudanum. At moments she longed for the kindly ministrations of that drug. She was unwilling to seek out Oram, uncertain of his feeling toward herself and her sisters. Pain seemed to gnarl her intestines like the roots of an old tree; only by direct command and demand upon her faculties was she able to make her way up the lane to the door. She did not bother now to walk round the house to the kitchen entry but pounded madly upon the front door unmindful of her keys, desirous only of rest and peace she knew were not to be her portion. Mary answered the door and let her in.

With uncertain steps she walked toward the old parlor door, almost unaware of the direction she was taking, remembering only the kindly ease of the long, cushioned settle to the right of the fireplace. She had sat there the day the will giving this house to them was read. Now it loomed large as a sanctuary.

"Mind where you be goin'," Mary's voice arrested

her querulously. "Just cleaned the parlor be an' your feet be heavy with mud. Think you we want again to do it?"

Apologetically Elizabeth murmured, "But I'm so tired, Mary."

"Tired is it you be," Mary's words cut across her slender store of consciousness like a knife in an unetherized wound. "Common an' no decent sister you be to Anne an' me an' all this township knows why too.

Runnin' after boys scarce out of diapers an' gettin' heavy with child by 'em an' then talkin' of bein' tired!" Mary's voice had risen to a scream. All the sublimated passion of months was let loose; she jumbled her words and slurred her usually sloven pronunciation in the madness of the moment.

Elizabeth had drawn herself grimly to rigid attention. She remembered that the preacher had told her to go elsewhere. For her this was the only possible elsewhere and the violent reception aroused briefly her old air of command. "So refuse me kindness you would, Mary? Me, who looked after you have when you knew not how! Ach, it is always one's relations who blame one the worst. Of you, I had not

thought this. Get me a little water." Anne, who had hovered with writhing hands on the outskirts, hurried toward the kitchen, her face paled beyond usual.

"Lord it you have these many years an' none of us said you no an' now you would have us cover your dirt as you have covered others in like case. Well, I, for one, won't an' there's an end to it. Like it you may not but have it you must." She stood with arms akimbo, her eyes flaming.

Elizabeth rallied, "A nice boy he was, Mary, an' like him too much you did as well as me. It would hurt him unneedful like if this known were. It must not be told. Help me, please." For the first time in many years Elizabeth admitted, yearned for the courtesy of her sisters. But she was not unprepared for refusal from Mary. She stood with her back toward the open door of the parlor; a few feet from her, down a flight of six stairs, stood the inviting settle. Its cushions seemed to beckon to her, to offer gratuitously what her own kin refused: comfort.

"Help you!" Mary screamed the words. "Lower than the dung in the cowyard you have made of

yourself an' you ask help of those who decent have kept themselves." Her hands swept out in a gesture of violent refusal; the fists collided with Elizabeth's bloated abdomen. She fell with a heavy thud.

Mary stood stricken watching the moaning figure at the foot of these short stairs; convulsively the body drew itself into a bow and then writhed into rigidity. "Salatheel, Raphael, Uriel, Michael, an' all the angels of darkness." Elizabeth's mouth uttered the preparatory words of the

incantation and then suddenly opened in the weird shrieks of a woman in labor. Mary cowered in the entry, her apron covering her face and head, her shoulders shaking with unrestrained sobs. Only Anne, white and in danger of fainting, retained presence of mind. Exerting all her strength she lifted the sick woman to the settle and rushed out of the door seeking assistance of some passerby on the highway.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONLY Elizabeth's robust constitution saved her from paying the extreme penalty for her night of folly in the shadowing Hexenkopf. Weeks were to pass before she would again walk through the kitchen. In the interim the winter asters bloomed and faded and the last of the coxcomb shed their brilliant red for russet.

Anne had been fortunate in finding a neighboring boy riding a filly and willing to hurry to Riegelsville. Providence had ordained that Oram should be in his surgery. He had just come in from a difficult case and fortified himself with more than a half pint of Scotch, drained at a gulp, before throwing his legs over his saddle-horse and riding to Elizabeth's relief.

It had been months since he had last seen any of the sisters and then he had not had an opportunity of speech. Stopping one day at the Robbsville general

store he had heard ribald comment on Elizabeth's sudden increase in weight. There had been the usual sly winks, smutty phrases and nudged ribs which so often contributed to a ruinous lie. Knowing. Elizabeth's strength he had smiled grimly and hoped that these tales escaped her notice. Because of this the nature of his call came as a surprise. Looking back on his contact with her he found himself regretting that he should have to know of her dereliction. It was as if a strong man, honored for his strength, had without just cause manifested a puerile cowardice. Galloping along he wondered whether at her age and under the existing conditions and circumstances it would be possible to salvage her life. In admitting the possibility he paid high tribute to her fighting courage.

Upon his arrival he was startled to be greeted by Anne. Of Mary he saw no signs. The emergency permitted of no questions. He rushed up the stairs leaving the effluvia of Scotch trailing in his wake as his wife left perfume. Anne gave him an efficiency he had never thought her capable of and he flashed her a look of relieved gratitude. He appreciated the

heights to which she had forced herself to rise in this ordeal and tried desperately to think of words in which to pay his respects. But he became

absorbed in his task, a distasteful one and unpleasantly gory. The delivery was relatively easy but the difficulties on Elizabeth's part were tremendous.

Throughout Elizabeth kept repeating her incantation between screams and moans. All of the color had been swept from her face. Her hands for once attained a femininity they had never before known, opening and closing spasmodically as if she were appealing her case and arguing it with gestures. From time to time Oram found it necessary to hold her hands close to her sides lest she tear her face. He thought as he worked that never had he seen a more tragic figure. Pity he gave her without stint and with it a high service that money could not possibly have repaid. Once he stopped and excusing himself repaired to the hall where he drained his flask hurriedly before returning to the sick room. Years later when he had become a confirmed alcoholic he was pleased to date his addiction from that day. Certainly

before that day he had been rated a temperate man.

For hours he battled, seeking against hope some signs of recovery. It was nearing ten o'clock when he turned heavily to Anne and said gruffly, "Well, the old girl'll pull through or I don't know what the Hell it's all about." He found his way downstairs, holding a lamp aloft and picking his steps with mincing precision, and turned into the parlor where he stretched himself on the settle and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Upstairs Anne kept lonely but unrelaxed vigil. It was past midnight when the door opened softly. Mary, her face wan with weeping, her shoulders stooped with weariness, entered in stockinged feet. "Elizabeth, how is she?" she inquired of Anne. From her seat by the bed Anne rose with an air of command equalling any Elizabeth had ever assumed. All her meekness had been lost in the struggle of which she had been a vicarious participant.

" 'T'is no fault of yours that dead she is not. Enough you have done to hurt her that now you should come crying and askin' questions. Let me

alone with her be an' mayhap when better she is she will forgive you." And Anne deliberately turned her back upon Mary. All that night she heard the soft pat of her sister's feet pacing the corridor outside. She sat stolidly, unmindful of the other's need of solace, her attention concentrated upon the

still, white figure on the bed. Anne did not understand the need of severity; she only knew that Elizabeth's need was great and that she had been the recipient of occasional kindness and beneficence from this woman who was also her sister. If she wondered how this dominant soul could have fallen from that rigorous rectitude she had attempted to enforce upon her and Mary, she resolutely put the thought aside.

Aroused from his sleep by a sixth sense, the doctor shook himself and glancing at his watch fumbled upstairs. His mind was still subject to alcoholic mystification but instinctively he knew that his missions always took him to the upper regions of the homes he visited. On the landing he met the weeping Mary, more attractive for her grief. With a charming casualness that was later to haunt his conscience he gathered her in an embrace, let his hands smooth her

tumbled hair, and then kissed her heartily. Startled she fled down the hall and into her bedroom. Only by this margin of infidelity did the doctor escape knowing the full story of this strange accouchement. Shrugging his shoulders he passed into Elizabeth's bedroom, felt her pulse, doled out pills and a vial of laudanum, lifted his hat elaborately and went his way.

In the period of Elizabeth's convalescence Mary voluntarily assumed the work of the kitchen and such outside work as was still necessary. Passing through the empty barns she regretted that they were no longer actively engaged in farming. It would have occupied hours of her time which now she was compelled to spend in idleness. She had expected to carry on Elizabeth's hexerei practices but there were no clients now. As if by magic the people of the countryside had withdrawn their faith and left the Marsons' menage severely alone.

Occasionally some devotee from Hellertown or Farmersville would suddenly arrive seeking guidance. Mary had striven desperately to give some measure of satisfaction but had been unable to quite

meet the demands of their credulity. It was a delicate situation; without Elizabeth's guidance she was lost. Ultimately they ceased to come.

Her days were shadowed by a fear of her future relations to Elizabeth. With a return of sanity had come a tremendous pity for her sister. She understood clearly that her cowardice only was responsible for any belief in

her virginity. Secretly she knew its untruth too fully to face her own conscience. For so long had Elizabeth ordered their mutual lives that she was uncertain of her rights in this house with which her days and nights had been so intimately associated for so many years. There was no one to whom she could go for advice. Her own sense of shame assailed every relationship she had ever established. In atonement for her wrong to Elizabeth she wished desperately that it were possible to reverse their situation.

Perhaps it was this that led her in her furtive effort at reconciliation with Amandus Simpson. Certainly it was by this course of reasoning that she justified herself. It was late one afternoon that she sought him out at his mother's house, seated disconsolately

on a bench at the back door, his eyes brooding on the valley below, the stump of his leg wrapped in such a fashion that it would not meet his eye unnecessarily.

"Good day, Amandus, to you an' may I set a little?" she said shyly as she approached him.

He gazed at her speculatively from beneath beetling brows. "Never shall it be said, Mary, that I refused a woman a seat. Sit you down. Mom to the store has gone but right back she will be an' talk the two of you can."

"But I came with you to talk, Amandus, like as we used to before to the war you went," she said quietly, a determined flirtatiousness in her manner.

"Those days are gone an' a cripple I be, Mary, an' the war it is over," he replied simply, a vast dismissal manifest in the restraint of his voice.

"Ach, it is over, the war? So busy have we been hear it we did not. But sure cripples be men, Amandus, an' some of them the better an' steadier than most." If she had endeavored to be arch her effort had failed sadly. Looking at her Amandus saw her

without the fever of passion that had distinguished their last meeting.

Involuntarily he lost himself in memories. She could think of nothing pertinent to say. He caressed the padded crossbar of his home-manufactured crutch and tried to relive that last meeting with this woman who edged closer to him on the bench. He had known her all his life without finding her desirable. Immersed in winning a living from this rocky farm for his

mother and himself, he had had little time for amorous contacts, had so exhausted his energies that there were few demands from within himself for the expression of sex. With the call for volunteers ringing in his ears he had found it impossible to answer though he had visioned in this war an opportunity for temporary escape from drudgery. Remembering the many heavy details of his soldiering days he smiled bitterly.

He had lost himself in the realm of his own thoughts. Mary was very close to him now, her hand rested on his knee. Instinctively he moved it a little, aware of her desire. He did not resent it but he feared any intrusion on these thoughts. The sun was

always a little warmer on this hillside, his body relaxed in the balm of warmth. It was only when the draft had been announced he thought that he realized the possibility of his dream materializing. In those hectic hours of preparation he had felt a desperate need of a woman. There had been no opportunity for selection. He had heard tales of Mary's complacence and had set himself in her way. There had been more desirable women who had occurred to his mind. Indeed he had shut his eyes against her homeliness and imagined these other women. He wondered casually now whether her other lovers had done likewise. Again he smiled vaguely. After all he had not known much about women then. The war and the amatory experience inevitable to a uniform had taught him much. Why, he mused, he must be at least fifteen years her junior. It came as a shock to him to realize this. His relaxing hand touched the stump of his leg and his face clouded.

Mary in her turn was reliving the experience. She had told him he might be a better man for his crippling but she remembered with passion the pressure of his thighs. She had told herself that she sought

to reconcile herself with him as a penance but now she knew the taunting madness of reborn desire. Without volition she slipped to her knees, her hands caught and fondled his. Once he had sought her so, groping for these outlets of life at its most natural level. His hands had entangled themselves in her hair that day. It would be good to feel their strength and intimacy again. It was impossible to think of rejection. She had given herself completely then. Surely he would not refuse her now. There was a laxity

about his body that did not conform with his reaction then. Looking up she sought and found his eyes full upon her.

Slowly he shook his head in negation. “I do not want you so, Mary, an’ that’s an end to it. Better it would have been had I never bedded with you. An’ now wanted I may not be by other women but I want not you.” His voice held a finality that she could not ignore. Stiffly he got to his feet with the aid of his crutch and turned toward the door of the house. There he stopped and addressed her again. “Better it would be, Mary, if you come not back

again. My mother she would not like it an’ I do not care.”

For a few minutes she sat quietly and then rose, smoothed her disordered skirts with trembling hands, and walked with bowed head toward the lane leading down hill. She had not expected this but she was too worried to actively resent his rejection. From time to time she would stop and lean against the gray, gnarled trunks of the trees lining the lane, delving deeply into her limited knowledge for some method of changing his mind, of reawakening his desire. She knew that he was a subterfuge, that almost any man would serve her purpose, but now she knew too that men were not easily found who would mate willingly with women of her age. Bitterly she resented her own unattractiveness and for a minute felt again that mad hatred of Elizabeth who had realized passion with the most attractive man of the community.

It was almost where the lane met the main highway that she encountered dour and ancient Mrs. Simpson. A spare built woman, this farmer’s wife had known maternity and widowhood and grief and

knew embitterment intimately. Instinctively these two were enemies. The older woman represented the vested rights of women through the centuries; she had confessed and shriven her son in his conscience-stricken moments when first he had returned. For her Mary’s action represented a reprehensible and unforgivable harlotry. In herself she vested the opinion of the community, sat in judgment, and admitted no mitigation of circumstances. Now this woman had again visited her son. Embattled maternity faced Mary. Realizing the unspoken convictions of this woman Mary would have passed on and held her peace.

“So again you trouble my son?” Mrs. Simpson said shrilly. “Even a crippled an’ bruised man you must have your loins to satisfy? Sure there are men enough in the village willing to take up with women like as you an’ your sister be without that you should have come troubling him.” The older woman stopped for lack of breath but her eyes held Mary.

Weakly Mary defended herself. “Lonely I was an’ just passin’ by an’ no harm it could do talkin’ with a neighbor.”

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With deliberate venom in her glance the older woman crossed over and cruelly smacked Mary’s face without any verbal preface. Then she laughed long and loudly and continued climbing the hill. The following day she was to tell about this in the sewing circle at the church and receive the commendation of her mates.

Stumbling over the hard-rutted road occasioned by a mild frost Mary hurried toward her home like a wounded creature of the woodland seeking its lair. Tears born in part of disillusion but equally of anger filled her eyes and overflowed wetting her chin and dropping unto the snowy folds of her fichu. All pretence and defence had been dropped now; she was a woman in dread need of sympathy. She found Anne in the kitchen busied with the careful preparation of Elizabeth’s invalid meal. Without hesitancy she told her story. The involvement of her thoughts and emotions and Anne’s limited experience made of Anne a diffident confessor. But she had learned much of human emotions in the hours in which she had heard involuntary confession from the lips of the delirious Elizabeth. Now she applied it bravely

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with the charity found so rarely in the truly celibate and virginal. Her arms cushioned Mary’s shoulders to her breasts as she murmured soft phrases. The very words were indistinguishable, only the tone registered the intention of wide kindliness. The milk heating on the stove boiled over and burned with its own peculiar aroma; Anne ignored it and clasped Mary tighter. Slowly Mary responded and relaxed the tension of her physique and emotions. Disengaging herself from Anne’s embrace she smiled weakly and went toward the barns. Anne returned to her task and completing it carried Elizabeth’s meal upstairs with that meekness always associated with her every movement.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THESE had been difficult weeks for Anne. The upheaval in the lives of her sisters had not been mirrored in her own life; by no parallel in her own experience could she appreciate the troubled waters of their emotions. Torn and worried with the strife of their emotions she had returned to the old comfort of prayer; nightly she now sought guidance from that source which her mother had instilled in her. Indeed she had never let it go completely, only sublimated it to the pattern demanded by Elizabeth. With her return to this earlier allegiance she had found her peace and from this peace gave unstintingly of comfort, sympathy, and thoughtful kindness to her sisters. Drowned in the extremity of their own lives they withdrew more and more into themselves until ultimately most of the duties about the house and land devolved almost entirely upon the uncomplaining Anne. There was

no intended injustice in this; they were lost in the depth of self pity and were never completely to free themselves.

Upstairs Elizabeth lay in gloom, curtains drawn close and shutters held tightly together with bits of ribbons. When she had regained consciousness she had insisted upon this exclusion of light. At first this had handicapped Anne in her movements about the room and the resultant intrusion upon Elizabeth's thoughts occasioned a petulancy unnatural to her at any time. She had fussed and scolded perpetually and Anne had suffered patiently. With the adjustment that resulted after some days, Elizabeth had relapsed into a moody silence that seemed divorced from all her past interests and activities. Rarely did she break silence but she gave to Anne's reports of matters below stairs and in the community an alert attention that proved her mind still competent and active.

Mary's confession perplexed Anne. Since her regaining her full senses Elizabeth had made no mention of her other sister and Anne had avoided any mention of Mary since it seemed best not to give

Elizabeth's petulancy food upon which to fatten its pettiness. Now she was faced with a huge problem compounded of several parts. She had sought

guidance through prayer but still the road was uncertain. Her knees shook as she approached Elizabeth's door with the tray of food. As she opened it she felt Elizabeth's eyes full upon her; it was as if they had invaded the most secret parts of her soul and drained her being of any personality exterior to Elizabeth's intentions and uses.

"Why, Anne, do you pray?" Elizabeth asked directly. "Something with Mary has wrong gone, yes? But not as I was is she, of that I am sure." A little dissatisfaction tinctured the assurance of Elizabeth's voice; she would have welcomed refutation of her statement.

As one in a daze Anne crossed the room, her mind occupied with an approach to those things she felt impelled to say. She set the tray upon the bed gently and adjusted the pillows to Elizabeth's back. With unusual alacrity Elizabeth drew her now gaunt frame to a sitting posture and extended a thin hand, unusually soft, toward the teacup. "Well, stand not

there like one deaf an' dumb," she said with exasperation evident in each word. "Tell me, Anne, what wrong has gone below stairs."

Anne hesitated. "Not right it would be, Betsy, to tell you of Mary's troubles less an' she gave her say-so to my doin' it. Wait a piece an' ask her I will." Without further comment or protest she went from the room. Elizabeth knew that Anne's business below stairs would take at least half an hour. Steadily and with little of the evidences of an invalid she crawled from the bed and settled into a chair near the door, the tray on her knees, her bare feet resting on a cushion hastily flung there. From long experience with the acoustics of the house she knew that every word would penetrate clearly here. With careful fingers she opened the door slightly and gorging food with her hands kept her ears wide for anything that might result below stairs. She had developed the faculty of eavesdropping in this fashion so thoroughly that she could by concentration eliminate all sounds not pertinent to the matter of her interest. To this same end she had perverted the openings for stovepipes from room to room. At

first this was intended merely as an aid to her hexerei practices but for some reason she had never revealed this espionage system to her sisters. In these last few days her reawakened interest in the routine of living had led her to make mischievous use of these devices in an effort to bring her

information up to date. To this end she had disguised the rapidity of her recent recovery of strength and continued the pose of invalidism.

When she returned to the kitchen Anne had found Mary sitting by the window in a low Boston rocker. In this brief time Mary appeared to have refound all her old sweetness, her face had been calm. Only her willing idleness bore testimony to the storm which had passed over her spirits. Gently Anne said, “Elizabeth, Mary, she has asked about you. Tell her I could not about your troubles until spoken with you I had an’ your say-so to do gotten. Best it seems to me that tell her we should. What think you?”

“Ach, Anne, troubled much have I been Elizabeth about. Sure I was unkind an’ mean to her an’ easy she does not forgive. Wish I do that she forgive an’ forget would but scarce hope I have that she will.”

She wept softly but without that abandonment that had marked her earlier grief. A silence enveloped them born of their mutual uncertainty of Elizabeth’s reaction. They had never penetrated either her emotions or her reasoning; they dared not venture an opinion upon such unsure ground.

Nothing of this escaped Elizabeth’s trained hearing. She too had experienced uncertainty in her resumption of relations with Mary. She continued eating heartily while her mind hurriedly reviewed the reasoning of the last few days. Anne had reported the falling off of the faithful and in it she saw the shadow of want again approaching. She had avoided directly facing the issue; had assured herself that once again she was in active command it would be possible to heal over this breach between the devotees and herself. This must happen else they were again without source of income. In her earlier eavesdropping upon Mary’s experience with Amandus she had learned of the war’s end and in that saw a fruitful source of income dissipated. No more would anxious mothers troop to her door. But there were always jealous swains and girls in trouble and

unsuccessful farmers who would seek her services. She had made so much headway against prejudice in the past that she could not, dared not, doubt her abilities now.

But in any effort she would need her sisters’ cooperation, a more intelligent cooperation than she had ever asked or needed before. This would necessitate a fuller revelation of her secrets and practices than she

had ever deigned to them since her assumption of “Blind Pete’s” active priesthood. She would have preferred it otherwise. She had not been unaware of Anne’s doubts of the past but now she knew definitely that Anne had reverted to the earlier faith and would stand staunchly by her convictions. As she looked backward she knew that Anne had never willingly withdrawn from the church and had given a most halting allegiance to hexen faith. In Mary she had found and must again find her most active tool. She rose to her feet with her old air of decision; she faced a difficult role and proposed to play it well. She dressed with care, by no misplaced garment, carelessly put on, must they suspect her of any physical unsteadiness. Weakness halted her

briefly as she drew the corset stays taut but she bravely continued her toilette. As she started toward the stairs she remembered the empty tray and returning bore it downstairs with her.

Her footsteps were deadened by the carpet Anne had placed upon the stairs to avoid annoying Elizabeth with noise. No sound revealed her approach to her unsuspecting sisters. She made her entrance with the dramatic intensity she had hoped to accomplish. Surprise and awe distorted the placidity of their features. So must Thomas have viewed the sudden appearance of Jesus. They were unprepared and their credulity kept them speechless before what they suspected must be an apparition from another world.

“Good it is, sisters, to be again here in my own kitchen an’ with you. Look not at me so foolish, Mary, for forgive you I do like as you wanted. More coffee, Anne, my strength might warm an’ a little nearer the fire my chair should be.” The commonplace remarks had been carefully considered and accomplished all that it was intended they should. She crossed to the hastily placed chair and seated

herself comfortably, first settling the cushion more to her taste. Watching her there it was difficult for Mary and Anne to think of her as ever having been confined to her bed and subject to the ministrations of a doctor and Anne’s nursing.

Neither sister ventured comment. Anne turned toward the food closet, her fingers explored intently among assorted sacks and packages. Carefully

she looked into tins and crocks, her brow puckered thoughtfully. “Coffee, there is none left,” she announced gravely. Elizabeth’s gaze was a direct question. “Sorry I am,” Anne went on, “but things have not so well gone with us, Betsy, while sick you’ve been an’ gifts fewer have become an’ more scarcelike these weeks past.”

For Elizabeth this was ominous news. She had not anticipated that want had again drawn so near. “Money there must be yet an’ now that there is no war coffee bought can be,” she replied, hiding her intuitive dread under a commonplace sentence.

During Elizabeth’s illness Anne had kept the store of cash and now faced the need of admitting its exhaustion. “Spent it I have what with the doctor an’

medicine an’ food,” she said with finality. Neither of them thought of any need of accounting, it was expended and Anne had said in what manner.

Elizabeth’s generalship had been as wise as her priesthood had been arrogant. She had found it not impossible to visualize a day of need and had taken primitive measures of precaution. She hesitated, uncertain whether this was truly an occasion to demand such measures and then turned to her sisters.

“We be in a bad way, Anne an’ Mary. Folks do not believe so strong-like in us as once they did. For this I have taken care but we must again build back their faith if we are to starve not. You, Anne, told me that the old Faxen woman no longer comes seeking help. An’ ever since Blind Pete died not a week has she missed our place visitin’ for herbs an’ charms against her death. When so bad it is that even she away keeps something we must do. Mind me now only those come from far away who heard have not of our troubles. An’, Anne, she tells me now that sometimes first they do talk with those in the village an’ go again home without having our place visited. This is bad an’ something we must do an’ that

quickly. Best it seems to me that slow we should go on such money an’ food as still there is an’ yet go on so like that no one of these nosey folk shall know how matters with us are. If so we do an’ ask no help back they will come again an’ with them more money an’ gifts. Best, too, it seems once to see what on hand there is an’ cook little but what eat we must.” In

these brief words she had mapped out her campaign for reascendancy in township affairs. In the days of her confinement she had thought of all this and planned directly for any emergencies she might be called upon to meet. She had taken no heed of the defects in her own psychology that were to interfere with the working out of this scheme. Her planned results would show a profit in cash and vengeance. Her need of the latter was insatiable; the former she had few doubts would result.

Anne and Mary left the room to inventory such supplies as were still available. After assuring herself that they were too busy to spy upon her activities Elizabeth climbed the stairs, holding and gently massaging the aching muscles of her abdomen with one hand and with the other clinging tightly to the

banister. Once in Susan's old room she turned the key softly, her ear tuned to any sharp noise occasioned by the clicking of the key or the squeak of a hinge. She surveyed the room. Everything was as she had left it. Anne and Mary had not presumed to invade this domain in their war on dirt and disorder. Dust lay thick on everything, clothes were tossed in piles on the huge bed, the windows were grimed with an accumulation resulting from months of carelessness. Ever since her assumption of the hexen rôle Elizabeth had forbidden her sisters entrance here. The undisturbed condition of the room was silent and satisfying testimony to the continuance without too much abatement of her authority among her own. Momentarily she felt a small emotion of gratitude but remembering her task here she thrust it from her and started. Thrusting her hand deep into the depths of an old fashioned water pitcher, bedizened like most of its kind with roses and carnations in frightful profusion, she was rewarded by the tinkle of coins. Withdrawing her hand and plunging again she soon had a small pile of silver and scrip lying by the side of the equally

florid basin. She had only begun her search. Over months and years she had secreted money here in places so numerous that she could not now remember where. From the folds of an old petticoat, tossed hurriedly on the closet floor, she retrieved several small coins. A picture over a stovepipe hole was askew. She tore it down impatiently and it gave forth the moldy change purse in which Anne had found Reeder's ten pieces of gold. Seven

of them were intact. Her eyes glistened with the greed of a field mouse working havoc in a cornfield; a sort of lust drove her on. She had unearthed more than enough money to keep them comfortably and with a measure of extravagance for several months. But she was determined to regain every piece her caution had yielded to this room. With unique energy in a woman so recently risen from a bed of confinement she pulled coats from their hooks and shook them violently, listening intently for any sound of rattling silver. She forgot the passage of time and the possible and probable curiosity of her sisters. Her persistence was amazing. Three times she sought specie in one coat and returning to it the fourth time found

two pieces of scrip. She remembered sewing some coins in the hem of an old dress on a rainy day. Without any endeavor to disguise her whereabouts in the house she turned the key and throwing open the door tramped downstairs and into the kitchen. “The shears, Anne, where are they now?” she shrilly inquired. Anne hurriedly brought the scissors from the sweetbriar workbasket and Elizabeth hurried upstairs. At twilight she again entered the kitchen, her hands holding a heavy velvet bag crudely but strongly sewn together. Harshly she said, “This bag an’ all that in it mine is to use for us till these fools their senses come to again and more bring us. Here I will put it the kitchen closet by that get it you may when must be. Sparingly use it an’ careful be that none but us know where it be.”

“Supper’s setting ready for you, Betsy,” said Mary timorously for the first time addressing Elizabeth directly.

“Ach, hungry I be like as I used to was when to market I went an’ walked long each way,” she replied, her words holding a more kindly tone, the

inflection less vicious by far. “Come eat with me, girls, so that lonely I shall not be.”

“Eat we did a good half hour gone,” responded Anne, “but set with you we will again once.” And she pushed Mary gently toward the other chair.

They ate in their accustomed silence. When the meal was finished Elizabeth, realizing a sudden weariness, rose and nodding to her sisters retired to her room. Tired and sore from the climb upstairs she stretched

herself on the bed for a brief rest preparatory to undressing and fell into a sound slumber fully clothed from which she did not awaken until dawn.

It was almost a month before Elizabeth summoned the fortitude necessary to invade the village. Nothing of her old arrogance was visible as she entered the outskirts of Robbsville and turned toward the general store and post office. She had timed herself so that she would arrive there just as the day's mail from the county seat was to be distributed. In this circumstance may have been evidenced bravado. Only Elizabeth could accurately answer that. But more of shy, tremulous apprehension

was evidenced in the very casualness of her approach to the place. On the porch, which extended the full length of the front, she pretended a very deep interest in the baskets of vegetables displayed there. Even the most keen feminine observers were foiled in their efforts to distinguish whether blushes mantled her cheeks or the exertion of her walk into town had raised her naturally high color. She passed into the gloom of the store without attempting to bid the time of day to the small group of matrons clustered at the entrance. If she was aware of their obvious withdrawal she gave no indication, afforded them no petty triumph. Among them she noted several of her former clients and indulged the hope that they would again seek her good offices.

The Marson girls had disposed of their horse months ago at a good price. He had been one of the innumerable animals used to draw cannon across the rocky crags of Gettysburg. Nonetheless Elizabeth stopped by a stand of carriage whips, their tips gayly braided with parti-colored thread. From these her interest wandered to a display of gaudy flynets with their tasseled fringe. In each movement she

gave evidence of her reluctance to penetrate to the rear of the store where a group of smirking men and boys had gathered about the potbellied stove. This reluctance was the more manifest as she walked slowly toward the mail wicket situated to the right of the stove.

Behind that wicket waited George Zentner, implacable foe of superstition and possessed of the most malicious tongue in the vicinity. Elizabeth dreaded her contacts with this man. At the height of her power she had always excused herself from calling at the store, letting the

unpleasant duty devolve upon one of her sisters. To-day she was doing this voluntarily as the first step in her campaign. She faced him bravely with set jaws and a gaze that asked and expected no quarter. So she would have faced a firing squad and the demand upon her could have been no more severe. Zentner looked at her a long minute and then in a softly modulated voice said, “Sorry I am to have heard you were sick, Betsy. Better I hope you are. An’ there’s no mail for you to-day.” The men about the stove gaped. Zentner had failed them. They let her turn away in silence.

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So she passed from the store into the sunlight of the porch and started her walk homeward.

She had gone but a little way when she encountered Mrs. Faxen, her long-time client and devotee of every passing cult. Deaf and badly crippled by rheumatism the old lady hobbled toward her on uncertain feet supported by an ebony stick sent her by a missionary grandson. It was Elizabeth’s touchstone and she availed herself of the opportunity. Facing the old woman squarely she addressed her, “Good day to you, Mother Faxen, an’ when will you our way be cornin’ again now as I’m better?”

Startled the chronic invalid looked at her; the look became an offended stare; her eyes lowered and she resumed her fumbling walk. Elizabeth’s face set more firmly in lines of determination as she again swung into her stride.

Near the edge of the village she permitted herself the relaxation of a brief halt for rest. It was to be fatal to her remnant of pride and self respect. A group of school children approached. Sighting her several of the older girls whispered and then giggled fitfully. Immediately they resumed a decorous attitude,

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bobbing their heads respectfully as they passed. Elizabeth followed them with her eyes, her lips relaxed into the first smile of her day. They had gone perhaps a hundred yards when they turned almost en masse and began shouting with appropriately atavistic gestures, “Betsy had a baby! Betsy had a baby! Shame! Shame! Shame!” Miserably she fled, their voices following her in the winter air, the nature of their derisive gestures haunting her. Of this experience she told her sisters nothing.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELIZABETH'S campaign for rehabilitation in community esteem was to be fine drawn and result in stalemate. After her first excursion into the village she ceased going at all save sometimes at night. Gradually a few of the more illiterate returned to her for intervention with the powers of darkness but those from whom she had received her fattest fees held aloof and ignored her. All that was charlatan in her rebelled at this limitation of her abilities. There was no play of wits in fooling these yokels. She disliked intensely listening to their silly tales of witching, their petty needs. Her confessionals brought her no largesse and no return of that glory which had so delighted her.

Once she stood by the gate leading from the highway to the lane when an elaborate carriage passed. A sere, heavy-coated man, palsied with years and the frosty air, sat comfortably inside and watched

the passing scene with ferret-like eyes. For a moment they rested on her, a moment that afforded both of them opportunity for mutual recognition. Jimson Reeder, visiting his old friend and fellow politico, Martin Rausch, was now a power in the Pennsylvania legislature. In the following year he was to vote for the bill against all forms of fortune telling which its sponsors hoped would eliminate the enfeebled power of the hexen. He saw in that moment a shabby woman, looking far older than he admitted possible, to whom he had once gone for some foolish rigmarole. He smiled a cold smile at his own folly and admitted a possible hysteria as the cause. She too smiled—but her smile had the quality of a hopeful sycophant in need and expectation of favors. He leaned forward to his coachman and spoke clearly, "If you do not whip up the horses our host will be kept waiting dinner. Hurry!" Elizabeth drooped almost visibly and turning her back toward the disappearing equipage looked toward her home.

She was distressed by what she saw. She remembered it as it was when they took it over. From time

to time she had hired James Chandler, an indifferent handyman, to make repairs upon it. Now it loomed in a light in which she had never before

viewed it. There were loose shingles on the roof, seeming to have slipped out of place at a deliberately rakish angle. Even from this distance she could clearly discern cracked and broken window panes. Its need of paint became painfully conscious to her as she wondered how its size could possibly have shrunken so badly since they first took up residence there.

It did not occur to her that her experience since then had included larger cottages. The illusion of color was outside her range of observation and intelligence. She speculated upon the possible cost of repairs and renovations. It was futile she knew to even meditate upon the possibility of doing anything at all. The velvet sack had been emptied months ago. She had sought carefully for any of her fiscal caches that might have escaped her earlier plundering. A handful of copper and a few bits of silver had resulted. These, too, had been eaten up. Now there

was nothing except the indifferent income from cheap folk.

She walked wearily toward the house. It became more positively hideous as she approached. She was overwhelmed with the necessity of desperate measures to which she felt herself unequal. Retiring to her room she gave herself up to a wild fit of abandoned weeping. It was as if a stalwart dyke had broken and there was no longer material or workman to accomplish the required repairs. This was the first of her attacks of severe melancholy.

Anne was now the only one who adventured into the village freely. Always colorless and but little associated with the active practice of hexerei, she had avoided that stigma among the more intelligent. Her blameless conduct had left her superior to those who now made village trips impossible for Elizabeth and Mary. From some secret source within herself Anne drew a strength peculiar to her needs; she developed ignorance to an art. It was almost as if she suffered defective hearing and ultimately the community accepted that as the explanation of her quaint obliviousness to the unnecessarily

insulting comments on her sisters. In time even the louts at the village store ceased to raise their voices in smutty innuendo. They had learned the impossibility of penetrating Anne’s placidity. So it was that Anne developed an almost scheduled regularity in her marketing at the store,

until in a matter of months she found it a pleasant relief to escape from her sisters by this excuse.

Distressed more than either Elizabeth or Mary by the ostracism—her little world of commonplace interests circumscribed by her loyalty to them — Anne had suffered much despite an exterior of stolidity. It was a gala day when stepping into the store she was greeted by old Mrs. Faxen, bell-wether of Robbsville gossips.

The aggressive dame who had cut Elizabeth icily approached Anne of her own volition. “You will be going home by my house, Anne, and welcome I would make you for a cup of tea. If you can spare an old, crippled woman a few minutes I’ll walk that piece with you.” Anne’s grateful acceptance was unfeigned. There had been fewer happier moments in these last few years than those in which she waited

for Mrs. Faxen to complete the purchase of bits of food and dry goods. Her intelligence comprehended that she, at least, was forgiven by the community. She wished whole-heartedly that this forgiveness included her sisters but she saw no conflict with her loyalty in accepting the gossip’s hospitality. Of course, she half suspected that the old woman’s superstition was responsible in part for this sudden good nature and mulled over her reply if she were asked to chant one of the old, familiar incantations. When she stepped out of the store by Mrs. Faxen’s side she was still undecided. But she felt no need of consulting Elizabeth and wondered a little at her newborn courage. Anne had found independence at last and in the years that still stretched before her she was to exercise it wisely and with consideration and courage.

That little walk through the village by Mrs. Faxen’s side partook of the nature of an official act, a community rite of re-instatement. By Mrs. Harrington’s they found themselves hailed and invited in. “Ach, Anne, a long time has gone by since last I saw you,” exclaimed that good woman preferring

to forget her avoidance of Anne during this period. “Now you must stop my crumb cake to taste and a little coffee to drink.” They emerged a half hour later commenting upon the merits of a crumb cake made with dark molasses.

Two more houses yielded light lunches and much chatter before Anne and Mrs. Faxen reached the old woman's own home. Anne remembered that the morning was almost gone and hesitated about stopping here but the older woman refused to accept excuses. "For just a little while an' a snack of dinner, dear," she urged, her free hand opening the gate invitingly. Anne succumbed. It was a little difficult imagining all this happening to her. Through the years these attentions and courtesies had been Elizabeth's prerogative.

Mrs. Faxen left Anne sitting alone in the dark little parlor, its mantle decorated by twin vases of peacock feathers, its floor madly carpeted with roses and forget-me-nots. Musing Anne waited. She could hear Mrs. Faxen bustle from the pantry to the combined kitchen and dining-room. Dishes clashed, horn-handled forks gave forth their contribution to the

domestic symphony. In these things she found the ingredients of peace and decision. Her nostrils expanded to the heavy odors of schnitz-und-knepp and a side-dish of boiled cabbage with spare-ribs. As yet they were not so poor that they could not afford these foods. She smiled as she recalled the axiom that food away from home tasted better. She whispered to herself, "An' better too it seems to smell." Her reverie was unbroken for more than half an hour before the fussing Mrs. Faxen called her to table.

After dinner eaten off "china straight from my nephew in Japan, he who preaches to the heathen, you know," they settled more comfortably by the kitchen stove. Slowly Mrs. Faxen led up to her desire. "Anne, would it not possible be to you to hex again my rheumatism like you used to do when by your place I came?" There was something pathetic about the question. Mrs. Faxen could not offend her own code of hospitality and justice by bartering it for a service. The evasive approach of the query was a compromise.

Anne sat very quietly a long moment and then replied, "Sadie Faxen, a good woman you have been

to me this day but that I cannot do. I have stopped this foolishment of hexerei an' left it to my sisters. Never it was for me anyway an' religion my mother saw good is better. I pray again." The last three words were heavy with the renunciation of false faith for better things. Sincerity had mated

with Anne's independence. She went on, "Think me not unkind for that I would not be, but better it seems the truth to tell than that folks should mistakes make. Mayhap with my sisters the power still holds but no one seeks it of them now." It was a futile effort to aid Elizabeth in her need of patronage.

Mrs. Faxen sat very quietly in turn. Together they gazed into the fire. Suddenly Anne rose and reached toward her shawl. "I must go. Worried the girls will be that something to me has happened." She crossed the room and adjusted her faded hat by the aid of a cracked mirror.

At the door Mrs. Faxen took her hands. "Glad I am, Anne, that you have found your way back to the Master. I know not about this hex business but afraid of it I am and old and foolish beside perhaps. Ach, Anne, when one grows old it is not good to live

an' one afraid to die becomes. Besides all my relatives away from these parts are. Come back, Anne, whenever passing you are. For me, I cannot visit you an' understand you must why. But sure two old women, Anne, may fuddle away their little time together." The pressure of her hands was so kindly that Anne's eyes watered quickly. Without hesitancy she leaned forward and kissed the other full upon the lips and hurried away.

From this grew a friendship that was to be invaluable to Anne and through which she was to be able to assist her sisters. Mrs. Faxen's house was small and she enjoyed a small income from the estate of a brother who had made money in slate quarries. She was related by marriage to most of the countryside and made no effort to disguise her interest in their affairs. Assured of Anne's sincerity in again embracing religion she made it her business to see that this reached the proper sources. A catalogue mind of all the inter-relationships of the township, she made a variety of calls, in each instance concluding her visit with the remark, "An' have you seen Anne Marson lately? Ach, a changed woman

she is an' not like her sisters. Off she has put this hexen stuff for the religion of her fathers an' prays she tells me she does. An' never one to lie was Anne. A shame it is that alone with her sisters she should live an' related cousins to most of us hereabouts. It seems to me something should be done for Anne an' the others too I suppose. Poorer than the church

mouse they are with scarce food to keep body an' soul together. My little bit I've done when Anne by has come but sure others might help." And her tone left little doubt as to whom she meant by others.

The last of her calls she reserved for a Sunday afternoon. The cunning schemer had carefully checked up her information before embarking. She knew that she had called upon all those who were related to the Marson sisters and thinking it over she approved her groundwork. Now she must knit together all her efforts by a final contact with one whose authority would give meaning to her action.

Intentionally she had picked a raw, rainy Sunday for her call upon the clergyman whom Elizabeth had visited so unsuccessfully. Her little store of sophistication where clergy were concerned gave her an

assurance Elizabeth could not possibly have simulated. Mrs. Faxen remembered the boy, her nephew, who was now ordained. If he had once been human she supposed this preacher had too. And she had been president of the Missionary Society ever since Pastor Freck's wife resigned. And her contributions were not to be scoffed at in a community as cautious in its dealings with God and his representatives as they were in meeting the drummer for a patent fertilizer. No indeed, she knew she was equal to the task she had set for herself and marched up the slate pavement leading to the parsonage door with a keen appreciation of the waiting battle.

Pastor Hellmuth opened the door in person. "Why, Mrs. Faxen, how delighted my wife will be to see you. These dreadful wintry days upset her so. But how thoughtful of you to call." His manner was not devoid of that professionalism which markedly interfered with the mission of so many of the clergy of that time. He left Mrs. Faxen a bit impatient.

"Come I did not to see your wife, Pastor Hellmuth, but to see you," she said tartly. "Your wife

I can see at missionary meetings and suchlike goings-on among women. But you I visit when needful an' needful I think it now. I want with you to talk about the Marson girls."

The preacher straightened his shoulders. "Really, Mrs. Faxen, you can't expect me to discuss such women with a decent woman like yourself." He

tried very hard to make this dismissal permanent and final. His two-year pastorate here had not taught him with whom he was dealing.

"For my own decency I'll take care, pastor," the little old woman replied sharply. "Never yet have I had to ask a clergyman to tell me as what is an' isn't decent an' I hope I never shall. We've preachers in our family an' heaven knows some of them are a long ways from sainthood. I come to talk about the Marson girls an' talk we shall or I'll take my membership from your church an' join the Methodists an' shout salvation with Preacher Steele's crowd. Sure an' they've always asked me to their socials and to bake cakes against their church suppers. An' that's something you an' your wife haven't done since comin' here." Her voice had the annoying

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quality of a wasp let loose in a ballroom. She had come primed with the pettiness which a mere man could not answer. He gestured toward the open door of his study.

The momentary interruption of entering the room and closing the door mattered not to Mrs. Faxen. She plumped her spare body into a chair, ignoring the squeak of protesting springs, and went on. "Now see here, Pastor Hellmuth, the Marson girls were born an' raised hereabouts an' older folks like me knew their parents. He, Will Marson, was no good to himself or anybody else but his wife, Sarah, was a good woman. An' I don't intend to sit by an' see the girls starve to death just because a lot of fool headed men are sure there's no good in 'em. An' look to this, too, pastor, the Marson girls are cousins to the Huffnagels, the Rauschs, the Perdersons an' all your church. An' yet willing you be to see 'em starve. Mind you I'm saying now if you do the time'll come when you sorely regret it will." In her excitement Mrs. Faxen lapsed into the dialect of the community, discarding the more precise English which constituted one of her claims to superiority.

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Here were facts which Pastor Hellmuth had to admit he had been guilty of overlooking in his severe condemnation of the Marson sisters. Vaguely he had realized from his study of church records that the heritage of these girls was good. He had familiarized himself with the terms of the will under which they held their homestead. In a later period clergymen were not to bother with such details but at that time a cleric found it wise to augment

his income from some source other than those ecclesiastical. Convinced of the worldly wisdom and benefits of insurance, Pastor Hellmuth, backed by the prestige of his churchly position, had created a good business as a general insurance agent.

Now he replied, “Much that you say is undoubtedly right, my sister, but it seems to me that these girls have so badly violated the principles of Christianity that were I, or indeed any of the parish, to attempt to assist them we would be condoning the indecency of their conduct.” He delivered himself of this dictum with a profound air of consideration. Clearly he wanted no extensive discussion of the matter. Crossing the room he seated himself at his

desk and with elaborate casualness glanced over a sermon lying there.

His parishioner hesitated a moment and resumed, “Pastor, old enough I am an’ surely you too must be to know that on this earth little perfection we find. Here are three women no longer young. Of them it is gossiped that two common have made themselves with men. Even so there is yet one who has not so done. For her sake much should be forgiven her sisters. An’ now that I think of it I wonder me much how many other women when less old did not do so also.” Her air of philosophic speculation annoyed the preacher.

“Can you not see, Mrs. Faxen, that this is a most absurd thing for us to discuss? If their needs are truly as great as you insist then some of the men of the parish will take it up rightfully with me.” He spoke in irritation with her manner and the subject.

There was an unaccustomed dignity to the gossip-monger as she rose. “Men, ach, the fools where women are concerned with! Enough that you should be like the rest. For myself I am not satisfied an’ old enough I am to risk the scandal. This week next

is the congregation’s meeting. In open meeting will I speak of it when men, women, and children together are. Sure, though the women do keep quiet in church even as said St. Paul they do pay most of the bills an’ without ’em scarce a dozen men would show face in church Sundays. Yes, I will speak out. Let them think what they will of me. Many of them I helped diaper when babies they were and sure not so old are you that I might not have the

same done for you." A fine frenzy of scorn, of outraged femininity, of injured pride and dignity made the parson realize that he had transgressed too far.

"One moment, Sister Faxen, that you must not do in God's house. Agree to be reasonable about this and I will do what I can even though it offend my personal conscience. More than that you cannot ask," his voice wheedled as he tendered his compromise.

Mrs. Faxen was a wise general. A few phrases confirmed his sincerity. She went her way taking the towpath home along the just finished canal, chuckling to herself at her victory. She was sure

that the preacher would stick to his agreement. "Men," she ruminated out loud, "are such fools. Always a wise woman her way can get if fuss enough she says she will make." And she started to hum a belligerent hymn in a cracked monotone.

Left alone in his study the clergyman paced the floor impatiently. The ways and means of approaching the subject were limited in part by circumstances and in part by his own intense dislike of the role he was forced into playing. Of one thing he was certain. At the annual meeting of the congregation the women must elect someone other than this Faxen woman as president of the missionary society. Virtuously he forbore permitting himself further indulgent ideas concerning her and resolutely set his mind to a solution of the difficulty. It was of course possible to go from house to house among these families related to the Marsons and canvass the heads of each family for opinions and assistance. The investment of time would be considerable. It was doubtful if he asked them to meet with him whether enough of them would respond to do much other than discuss the matter. Then, too, he must go slowly. There

were those among the Marson girls' relationship who had given them a strong allegiance in their witchcraft practices. Suddenly the solution occurred to mind that as he viewed it was ideal. Hurriedly he pawed through the pigeonholes of his secretary-desk. From one of them he dragged forth a notice written in flowing script. In formal language, stolen deliberately from Hill's Manual, it invited him to make the invocation and address at the Robb family reunion scheduled two months later. Here would

be the ideal opportunity to discuss the matter with the entire family, including the women. But the congregational meeting was to occur earlier. Hellmuth frowned, then seated himself at his desk and indited a letter to Mrs. Faxen formally promising to take up the matter at tire reunion meeting.

Of all this Elizabeth, Mary, and Anne were ignorant. Daily they faced the need of more rigid economy. The shelves which had once borne testimony to Elizabeth's influence were almost empty; only a few cans of fruit and vegetables remained. Sugar and coffee had been abandoned long ago and Anne avoided their use when visiting her increasing

circle of friends. Such gifts as now found their way into the Marsons' home were made to Anne. Again she was active in church circles and once or twice kindly women had employed her as a seamstress. She would have continued accepting this kind of employment if Elizabeth had not happened to overhear a remark reflecting badly upon her handiwork.

Walking morosely toward the village with no intention of actually entering it Elizabeth had passed near the home of one of the Huffnagels. Martha, the eldest daughter of the family, was seated on the stoop, laughing and giggling with a girl chum. As Elizabeth approached she had risen, pirouetted lightly, displaying her frock, and remarked thoughtlessly, "Better it would have looked if mom out of pity had not hired that fumbling Anne Marson to sew on it. Now it hangs uneven by the back and since no more material there is fixed it cannot be. So angry it makes me to think that mom good money would pay out to have material so nice spoiled." Suddenly she saw Elizabeth and fell into a significant silence, her right eye signaling her chum with an open audacity. Elizabeth had passed without

speaking but as soon as she had turned a corner in the road she hurried across the fields homeward, her pride incensed that Anne should have betrayed her by accepting disguised charity.

Her anger soared as she reached the kitchen and confronted Anne. "Fool that you be," she flared, "takin' sewing from those who laugh at your pains an' say you spoil their goods. Look not so hurt for this I heard by the Huffnagels' place from Martha herself who told it to another an' soon over the entire township it will be that so low we have fallen we take work we

cannot do." Despite her anger tears came to her eyes when she saw how badly she had hurt Anne. With unwonted gentleness she said, "Ach, but it hurts me, Anne, sister, to see how folk do wrong by us. Sure, an' we know there are worse women far hereabouts an' you so good an' kind. Why can they not face me with such like things? Tell them I would what scum they are an' without waste of words to be nice." All the rest of that day Elizabeth was morose. Only when she passed Anne her hands with gentle caresses asked forgiveness.

After that whenever anyone offered Anne employment

as a seamstress she would smile shyly and remark, "Ach, but now that old I am getting my eyes not so good are an' better that someone younger you should have in to help with the fittings." If they were insistent she countered, "But I like not away from the house to be. Elizabeth, she is not well like once she was an' Mary an' she are all I have left."

It was lamentably true that Elizabeth had never quite recovered after her unfortunate confinement. Steadfastly she refused to consult Oram. From time to time she would steal away by herself and in a half-believing mood murmur the incantations that had once been her means of livelihood. Her faith and credulity had been weakened by her ordeals. From the reiteration of mystic and powerful phrases she failed even to derive a philosophic consolation. Impatiently she tried the variety of patent nostrums carried in stock at the general store. It mattered not what the specific was intended for, she took it hopefully. In time she discarded even this effort at regaining her health and spirits and fell into a lethargic state that bordered closely on the manic-depressive. There was no one save Mary and Anne

to notice this progress toward senile decay and in themselves they found too much in common to quite appreciate the distortion of characteristics that hampered Elizabeth.

In these moods her mind reverted often to the escapade of her seduction of the schoolmaster. Only now she visioned herself as a woman conquered against her will. Still the boy was desirable. Sometimes she secreted herself and forgetting the futility of her gestures arrayed herself again in the clothes of her undoing. Only when she was quite sure she was alone did she permit herself this luxury. Now when she spoke to her sisters about it, she

spoke in scorn of her own weakness and the boy's deceit. She ignored her invasion of his life and waxed vicious on the subject of his infamous depravity. Alternating between times of elation at the experience and moments of mad repentance she took a straight highway toward insanity. The old strength of her body warred against this deterioration and years were required to completely break her but in the elapsing time her actions and manner became progressively more erratic. From living intensely in reality she

deliberately submerged herself in a vicarious emotional life centering it upon one abnormal experience. Tragedy was inevitable.

Elizabeth's condition wreaked havoc in the lives of her sisters. Mary, faced with a terrific battle for balance in herself, absorbed much of Elizabeth's vicious melancholy and withdrew herself almost entirely from contact with her sisters. Only Anne made a personal effort toward stabilization in herself and accomplished a measure of satisfaction.

Perhaps if the judgment of the town had been less severe and more hesitant of expression it would have been different. But it was impossible for Elizabeth and Mary to avoid the full measure of their chastisement. Anne's friends would walk with her as far as the gate leading off the main road and then stop short, finishing their conversation and hastening away to avoid meeting either of her sisters. Anne could not find within herself the strength necessary to protest against this and contributed her share to their unhappiness by her simple comments on the normal life of the community. At first, when she was still hopeful, Elizabeth had been much interested

in all this but as her brooding moods hung more heavy over her consciousness she was impatient and sulky at this intelligence. From the beginning Mary ignored this pleasant talk of folk whom Anne found friendly. In time Anne sensed this animosity to her budget of gossip and sublimated her own desire for friendly conversation. Now she found herself without an outlet for the myriad impressions of her petty social life. She too began experiencing the desire for isolation from normal interests. None of the sisters was completely unaware of the unhealthy condition toward which they were headed. As a result these depressive silences were patterned with wild chattering hours in which it seemed as if all that had

transpired in their entire lifetime must be relieved in words. A normal person exposed to their life for a brief day would have been distracted with the burden of understanding exacted by their odd temperaments.

It was on a particularly difficult day for Anne that the message came from Pastor Hellmuth. She had been to town that morning and upon returning

had mentioned carelessly that Martha Huffnagel was shortly to be married.

Elizabeth turned in fury, "Marry the wench an' let her bed in decency. God knows trouble enough she was to me when after the Serfass boy she ran an' without proper care to herself. Fool that the man is when he could have her without the preacher's words."

In the midst of this vituperation there came a loud knock at the front door. Elizabeth and Mary scurried upstairs, the rustling of their garments being reminiscent of the scamper of rats. Anne, her bosom heaving from the excitement of Elizabeth's anger, timorously opened the door.

Outside she found Pastor Hellmuth's man of all work, his tremulous hand holding fast to his horse's bridle, one foot resting in the stirrup. In his perturbation at the oddity of his mission he almost shouted, "Pastor Hellmuth, he said for to tell you, Miss Anne, that he wants as you should come by the family reunion next week at Edwin Huffnagel's homestead. There be business to talk over with you once." Frightened and unnerved the more by Anne's

distracted appearance he remounted awkwardly and cantered off.

Startled Anne stood stiffly in the doorway. Suddenly Elizabeth spoke abruptly from the stairs back of her. "For why should they send for you, Anne? Two others of us there are with equal an' sound rights this place in. With you I shall go." The message had resurrected briefly the old, imperious Elizabeth. She was defiant.

Anne gestured in puzzled awe, "Why they want me I know not more than you do. But go I shall. Things not much worse can be with us than they have become. It matters not to me if go you want to, Elizabeth. Glad I shall be of company. Let the matter so rest till then."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FRIDAY of the following week, the day set for H the reunion of the Robbs and all those interrelated clans in William Township, was a perfect spring day. As Anne drew on her clothes she admitted to herself a feeling of excitement and was yet a little tremulous as to what the day might bring forth. Since the delivery of the message by Hellmuth's servant, Elizabeth's truculence had increased. Her violent tirades against all of their relationship had increased in volume and invective until Anne had carefully sought to evade the topic at all times. Anne made her way downstairs in a thoughtful mood. If Elizabeth were still determined upon going along she feared that the day would be most unpleasant. She was tired of strife and would welcome any opportunity to escape more of Elizabeth's bitterness. At no time had Mary made any comment. Elizabeth had indicated that she spoke for Mary

as well as herself and Mary had not dissented to this. Neither had she said it was so.

But that morning apathy had again claimed Elizabeth. She was unaware that this morning differed any from the majority of mornings in her life; she had lost any sense of its importance or its meaning. For this there was no explanation save the ebb and flow of her mood-harried mind, unequal to the task of holding a steady course. Almost Anne admitted to thankfulness. Out of a sense of fitness and duty she reminded Elizabeth of the occasion. She was met by a dull, vacant stare and a murmured, "Ach, yes, go you." By these simple words Elizabeth formally relinquished her rule. Only on rare occasions was she to rally to resentment or active regret. Mostly she was unaware of it and when aware seemed not to care.

Mrs. Faxen put in a sudden appearance at the kitchen door that morning, a large package wrapped in a worn sheet tucked under her arm. It was the first time she had visited here in more than a year. Anne dreaded the possible reaction of her sisters. Elizabeth looked at the old woman and seemed not

to recognize her. On her part, Mrs. Faxen stared at Elizabeth with amazement and then catching Anne's eye tapped her forehead suggestively. Mary curtly bid the visitor the time of day and without apparent rancor left the room. Elizabeth sat on gazing fixedly before her. Suddenly she seemed to have fathomed to her own satisfaction the significance of the woman's gesture. Rising she walked toward her and standing directly in front of her said dispassionately, "No, not that! I tell you not that!" Her eyes became soft with a luminous mist of tears and she almost seemed to grope her way back to the rocking chair which she had vacated in order to make her protest. She sat quietly, her face wet with slow-seeping tears, until mercifully she fell asleep. Anne and Mrs. Faxen had been unable to do anything except sit in enforced quietness. Now they tiptoed from the room together. Elizabeth slept on.

Anne led the way upstairs and then stopped short on the landing. She remembered that Mary had left the room and surmised that she had taken refuge in their bedroom. It might be equally embarrassing

to go into Elizabeth's room in the event of her awakening. Yet Mrs. Faxen had indicated the need of privacy. Slowly she led the way toward the room that once had been Susan's and from which Elizabeth had so long excluded them unless she accompanied them there. It had been months since she had even glanced inside. Remembering its disordered and dusty appearance then she whispered apologies before throwing open the door.

It was Mrs. Faxen who pushed the door shut. Sure that it was closed tightly she looked about her for a place in which to lay the sheet-shrouded bundle. Without apology she swept the debris of old clothes from the bed and depositing her package began removing the pins. "Now don't you be offended, Anne, but go to the reunion in the clothes you have you shall not. Not as long as I have a few things left an' we're near of a size. So, I said to myself when I dressed this mornin', I'll take over to Anne my black poplin with the white silk cuffs and a bonnet that like she will. I guess you have shoes, but just in case you don't, I brought these with the high heels so that right you should look. I'll not have any of

those fussbodies say that I haven't done my share." With each of her excited phrases she had lifted a garment from the bed and thrust them

energetically at Anne. Anne's arms and hands were laden down. Mrs. Faxen's kindness may have been generated by mixed emotions but Anne's gratitude was genuine to the point of being painful.

"Thank you for these I cannot," she replied. "But back you shall have them like as when you brought 'em to me. Ashamed I was to go in the shabby things I left have, but come they said I was to, an' go I wanted to."

They wasted no further words and few motions. Hurry was the order of the day and Mrs. Faxen was an impatient aid. Anne was dressed hastily but neatly for the event toward which Mrs. Faxen had devoted much plotting energy. Before leaving Anne sought out Mary, sulking in her room as she had suspected, and cautioned her to look after Elizabeth. In the kitchen Elizabeth was found sitting in exactly the same position in which they had left her when going upstairs to dress. Without affectation

Mrs. Faxen kissed her lightly in sympathy as they passed out on their way to the reunion.

It had been a long time indeed since Anne had driven in a buggy. The spavined mare that was Mrs. Faxen's means of transportation was far from fashionable but she cantered along faithfully. Mrs. Faxen decided the time had come to appraise Anne of exactly what to expect. Without preamble she opened, "Anne, awfully in need you an' your sisters be an' too proud to ask. Oh, I know an' so do others though you never intended as we should. Related you are to all these prosperous folks in the township an' only right it is that after you they should look somewhat. An' willin' they will be, too, only askin' they needed. Well, ask 'em I did, an' to-day's the day when answer they will." There was a vast satisfaction in her voice. Anne held silent, until a little annoyed, the gossip said, "What think you?"

"Ach, I know not but Elizabeth she would not like to take from these folks who went about keeping our way out of in this last year or so back. For myself it does not matter, though I like not too well their charity," Anne replied. She wondered why she

found it easier to express Elizabeth's dislike than her own. She knew her own aversion to equal Elizabeth's. But she forbore any amplification of her remark.

“Better it is, Anne, that you should eat regularly than that your pride should make you go hungry to bed,” was Mrs. Faxen’s practical comment.

A few minutes later they turned into the driveway of Edwin Huffnagel’s farm. A pompous little man, proud of the opportunity to serve as host to the assembled family, he stood by the wide gate obligingly swinging it open to permit entry and then bustling over to bid his guests welcome before they drove ahead into the barnyard. Now he hurried to greet Mrs. Faxen and Anne.

“Good it is to see you, Cousin Faxen, and to see you too, Anne Marson. For you both I have been watching. Pastor Hellmuth is in the parlor waiting for you an’ best it is that you go there, once,” he said, heartiness and good nature rampant in his round, perspiring face. His hands took the reins and he urged the horse toward the barns, stopping it at the front door while the women alighted.

A flock of female relatives greeted Mrs. Faxen enthusiastically. Toward Anne their manner was constrained. But for the former there was much kissing and confidential greetings with little sops of salacious gossip. Shrewdly Mrs. Faxen suspected that this was a tribute to her unrestrained tongue rather than a sincere cordiality and she wasted no time. “Anne, you in to the pastor go, while I with the women talk a while,” she commanded brusquely assuming an authority Anne had not delegated her.

There was little Anne could do but obey. She entered the parlor with downcast eyes; almost she regretted having come at all. A quick glance revealed that the cleric was absent. She seated herself primly on the edge of a red damask sofa letting her gaze wander curiously about the room. Her interest was aroused by a quilting frame set against the farther wall. The pattern was one with which she was unfamiliar and she crossed the room to view it more closely. Studying the intricate design she forgot the cause for her presence here. Hellmuth’s voice startled her into turning in blushing confusion.

“You, Anne Marson, are here for a matter more

important than patterns for a quilt,” he said severely. “It is my intention to ask the members of your family to overlook the sins of your sisters and yourself and help you to live better lives. This is an opportunity to show

your repentance for the misdeeds and witchcraft practices of which you and your sisters are guilty. I shall ask you to publicly apologize." His tone was contemptuous; he made no effort to disguise his condescension.

For the second time in her life Anne was aroused. It was almost a different woman who turned upon this representative of the community's virtue. Her voice was a lash. "Pastor Hellmuth, once my sister Elizabeth visited you in trouble, an' no help you gave her. Sick in her head she is now because of the nastiness of good folks. With Mary there is sickness, too, an' sometimes myself I feel it. If wrong we have done, mind you, by us others wrong have done too. An' come not here to fight did I, but not to make excuses for my sisters or myself. What they have done they have done, an' punished enough it seems to me they are. Poorly it sounds from a man of God, that worse he should wish them when help

them he can. For myself I can look after, but speak not so my sisters about or home I shall go." Hellmuth was left in no doubt of her intention to do just that. He had boasted piously of the good he hoped to do for these girls. If Anne left his position was ridiculous. He was about to speak when Mrs. Faxen made her entrance. In a moment she apprehended the full situation and took command.

"Pastor, no need is there to speak harshly to Anne. And for the others I am afraid little can be done save to see that they do not want. Elizabeth is consumed by the devil she has served and her head is clouded inside. Mary, too, suffers. If you will let me alone with Anne all will be right." Her gesture left the man no choice. Literally she put him out. He took his ruffled dignity to the cider barrel and felt a little better when he turned away to resume his cleric conversations with a group of men. Before he left them he had lifted his spirits still higher by the sale of a substantial amount of fire insurance. With good fortune he mellowed, aiding the process copiously from time to time at the cider barrel.

It was late afternoon when the matter of the

Marson girls came before the assembled family. Anne had eaten a bountiful dinner seated alongside Mrs. Faxen. The heavy table had delighted her eye. Dressed on each end with stuffed suckling pigs, its middle loaded with roasts of pork and beef, chickens and ducks, it was worth a longer journey

than she had made. Side dishes of succotash and potted beans, apple dumplings, spiced pickles, and a variety of sweets attested the prosperity of the host. On a fireplace built for the occasion huge gallon coffee-pots gave off a delicious aroma while layer cakes and pies were sliced for the dessert course. Had Anne overeaten she would have been in good company. Pastor Hellmuth found it necessary to leave the table hurriedly. He excused himself by accusing the ducks. "Shouldn't eat them at all," he told solicitous women, "they always make me ill because of the grease." Broad smiles and snickers among the men he ignored with feigned dignity. It was, he had learned, wisest.

Prefacing the general discussion of the affairs of Elizabeth, Mary, and Anne, Hellmuth spoke blandly. "Dear friends, you will remember, I am

sure, St. Paul's admonition to be charitable. His charity was not philanthropic but a selective love predicated upon justice. This afternoon, as your spiritual adviser, I am calling upon you to exercise this charity toward three women of this parish who have seriously fallen from grace." He stopped impressively. The minute that he let elapse permitted the men present to exchange grave looks among themselves and the older men moved into a little knot at the rear of the assembly. Continuing he said: "We will not venture to say that these women have been wanton, for that would be equal to calling them harlots. And we are told they are not so. Let us say they have been unrighteously generous with the favors of their person. These same women defied Pastor Freck, my admirable and esteemed predecessor, by publicly representing the powers of darkness among you. Properly their punishment at the hand of God is just. It was written that they should know want when they enlisted under Satan's banner. Properly . . But his bawling voice suffered interruption.

Josiah Huffnagel, oldest man of the group, rose in the enraged frailty of his ninety-two years. Supported

by his cane he had pushed himself to the front of the group and now spoke, his reed-like falsetto ominous with wrath, "Stop, man that you be, these women be kinswomen of ours an' our business is with them. Freck, indeed! Was I not among those that asked his leavin' when he too knew not how to hold his peace with decency? Fool, what we know you need not tell us!

Forty years taught I school on Morgan's Hill an' a little I learned of the grace of God from Pastor Merz, a better man than forty Frecks an' you. Go your way in peace but talk not to us of wantonness an' charity an' deserving. Say I not right?" he queried the group. Calls of "Right you are." "Tell the parson to get on home!" and "Too good is he for us!" were the reply.

The effect of his stimulants overcome by the gravity of the situation, Hellmuth recognized the unwisdom of attempting any defense at this moment. Blanched of face by the possibilities of a forced resignation he prepared to depart. Bringing up his horse and buggy, his host, Edwin, the genial, scowled at him and remarked, "Better you had go quickly. We men did not like such talk from you. An' forget you will the insurance of which we

talked." For the first time Hellmuth was fully conscious of the extent to which he had trespassed in the lives of this most important family among his parishioners. That very afternoon he set in motion inquiries looking toward a new charge.

With Hellmuth gone, old Josiah took charge of the meeting. "Susannah Robb an' Sarah Marson an' Will Marson I knew an' vain an' foolish an' weak they were," he started off, "but sinful was none of them save Will when too many drinks he had had. True it is as the parson said these girls have held traffic with the hexerei; but have not often some of us to them gone? Best it seems to me it would be if we asked Anne to say how things with them are. Speak up, Anne, an' tell the truth an' shame the Devil." He went toward her and drew her to her feet with gentle, persuasive tugs of his wrinkled, kindly hands. While she spoke he sat on the seat she had vacated and held her hand paternally.

"Ach, I know not what to say!" Anne protested. "Elizabeth, she here should be to talk for us. But here she is not an' my best will I do. My sisters, Elizabeth an' Mary, sick are a little in the head, not so much so that away they should be put, but too far

they have gone themselves ever to be again. Work they cannot an' food there must be to eat. Terrible it is an' little that I can do an' others they are afraid of." The calm, dispassionate statement was accorded silent respect.

“Charity, Elizabeth she would not like but what Pastor Hellmuth says was not true. Hexen, Elizabeth, she may be, but never nasty with her use of it have I known her to be an’ now pitiful it is to see how down she has gone.” Anne stopped again. There were so many things she wanted to explain and so few words at her command in which to offer explanations.

In the chatter of feminine voices she had heard one woman tell another, “Not older than I am can they possibly be an’ just fifty I touched last week. An’ they look like women of seventy or more with their thinness an’ wrinkles an’ old clothes. Although I will say Anne a nice appearance makes today.” Overhearing this latter sentence Mrs. Faxen expanded with pardonable pride. Had she heard the earlier remark she would have been vitriolic. Anne was appalled by the sudden realization of her relative youth; surreptitiously she felt of her face and hands and confirmed the precocious wrinkles. The

inescapable vanity of woman resented the comparison.

Josiah resumed, “Something we must do an’ that quickly. To my way of thinkin’ the men they should together get an’ decide an’ the women separately decide what an’ how we should about this matter go.” As if by magic the sexes segregated themselves and began their discusssion of ways and means.

The discussion had the sound of an auction sale. This man pledged so many cords of wood at such and such a season of the year. The father of five sons promised three days’ work a week in rotation from each of them during the planting and harvesting season. Their mother readily agreed to give a score of cans of fruit and as many of vegetables. Another of the women promised to go by and assist in the cleaning from time to time. Heartily they vied with one another in the proffer of gifts and service. Among the women Mrs. Faxen made careful inventory of the pledges given while Josiah busied himself in like fashion among the men.

Anne was forgotten in the mood of generosity. She stood a little apart, her brows drawn in wonderment, curious as to the result of this group effort

and a little resentful at being excluded from their councils. Later recipients of charity were to appreciate an even more intense reaction of similar calibre toward the impersonal work of professional charity workers. For

Anne it was an emotion bordering too close to ingratitude to be a comfortable feeling. As if to avoid this she turned away fastening her gaze upon the road over which she had come with Mrs. Faxen earlier in the day.

Far away a figure was marching steadily toward her. She looked intently, haunted by a feeling of familiarity. Surely she knew this person, it must be a woman. She became absorbed in its progress toward her. Suddenly she gasped audibly and started to walk toward the gate. The woman was clearly visible now; Anne could not be mistaken. It was Elizabeth. Without thought she broke into a run toward her sister. As they approached nearer each other she saw that Elizabeth was only partially dressed and bare of foot. She made slow progress, weaving from side to side of the road as one lost and vaguely wandering. When she was within ten feet of Anne she collapsed suddenly; her body pathetically limp, her

tortured eyes closing against the heat and the little clouds of dust arising from the roadway.

Not far behind Anne some of the men, attracted by her odd action, had followed. When they arrived they found Anne supporting Elizabeth's head and crooning softly as if she were aiding a tired child into a calm sleep. She had sunk into the road by her sister's side forgetful of the elegance of Mrs. Faxen's poplin, and the nearness of help, anxious only to reassure her sister of a friendly hand.

With rough kindliness the men bore Elizabeth back to the family gathering. Women scurried off in search of vinegar and a drop of liquor concealed from hard-drinking mates. Restoratives of all kinds were suggested and applied. Slowly Elizabeth regained consciousness. With the ferocity of a woman in labor she suddenly tore at those seeking to minister to her, wildly shrieking and cursing, invoking all of her familiar spirits, running the gamut of demonology in her mad search for power. The men hurried to assist the women in restraining her. Ropes were brought and she was loosely but effectually trussed up. Those who had assisted were breathing heavily when it was accomplished. Like a hog tied

for the killing they carried her into the parlor and laid her on the bed. Two of Edwin's sons stayed with Anne and their mother to look after her.

Without, another consultation was held among the men. They were unwilling to consent to her incarceration in the cruel asylums of the time. In this they were motivated by considerations of family pride rather than kindliness toward Elizabeth. Ultimately Josiah bore their decision to Anne.

Calling her out of the parlor into the cool hallway that ran the length of the house he skilfully maneuvered her toward the far end before attempting to talk. “Anne, worse Elizabeth is than we thought. About her we have been talking an’ wondering. Unwilling we are that into strange hands she should be put but unsure we are that after her you can rightly look. An’ there be few who care will willingly give to a crazy woman, sister though she be. However, if willing you are, willing we be, to have her at home with you. But seemingly this hexen matter to her head has gone badly an’ from it she must be kept. Hide from her her books, an’ keep folk from seein’ her about this, an’ look after you the family will. Unless this you can do we are stumped

an’ no one knows what to do,” he declared. Anne had given him careful attention.

Now she replied, “Believe it folks will not, but today for the first Elizabeth like this has acted. Ach, it must be the sun has struck her, an’ made her so for this time only. But to what you say I will agree to do. There is nothing else an’ live we must.” Resignation, fear, dread, and loyalty mixed in Anne’s tearful words as she spread her hands in a gesture of fatalistic acceptance of the offer. Together the dean of the family and Anne turned and paced back up the hall to the parlor door. There he left her to return to the men of the clan and convey her agreement.

Several hours later Elizabeth stirred fitfully and opened her eyes in passable recognition of her situation. Too weak to strain at her bonds she looked pathetically and questioningly at Anne who had never left her side after the conversation with Josiah. “Feel you better?” Anne inquired. Elizabeth nodded drowsily. “Ach, yes. Sorry I am, Anne sister, trouble to have made you. Take me home.” A minute later she was soundly and apparently normally asleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WHEN they brought Elizabeth home late that night of the reunion a new life began for Anne, a life in which she assumed a command and authority from which she had shrunk all her life. They found Mary soundly asleep, her clothes piled neatly on a chair near the bed, apparently suffering no qualms of outraged responsibility. Anne refused to awaken her and those who had come with Elizabeth and her were far too fatigued by the excitement of the day to dispute this issue.

In the weeks that led gradually into the full, hot summer of 1867, Anne was kept very busy adjusting their lives to the new order. This united charity was a novelty; its originators overdid it. Sometimes more than a score of men and women visited the house in a single day. In addition to their gifts and donations each delivered a little homily or a choice bit of advice.

To all these Anne listened patiently. But without faltering she directed the interior arrangement of their lives, even occasionally deliberately lying rather than argue the point. Although exasperated and annoyed Anne was loth to point out that these wholesale visitations reawakened Elizabeth's memory of hexerei and her lust for power.

After one of these trying days Anne spent frantic hours in searching for her mad sister. The possibilities of the house and outbuildings being exhausted, she lighted a lantern and searched the twilit main highway a mile in both directions. On anxious feet she turned back toward the house, softly, persuasively calling Elizabeth's name. Suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, Elizabeth loomed before her, a vacuous grin smirching her face. There was no offered explanation and Anne was too relieved to question her closely. Such questions as she did put Elizabeth parried with deliberate evasions. In the days that followed the demented woman was more docile. Anne found it not impossible to entrust her to the occasional care of the brooding Mary and find

surcease in short walks and visits to nearby neighbors.

Mrs. Faxen was a frequent visitor. Having won her victory she still supervised the result of the conquest. Let a woman get behind on her promised allotment and she could be sure of a call from the old lady. In these calls Mrs. Faxen wasted no words. She entered the house, demanded the missing goods, gave curt and perfunctory thanks and was back in her buggy and on her way all within five to ten minutes. In time the women of the family came to expect her collections and made no effort to send their goods to the Marson house.

It was Mrs. Faxen who fathomed the mystery of Elizabeth's disappearances. Taking a short cut through the woods at twilight her darting eyes saw a figure moving at the foot of Hexenkopf. Her awe of the neighborhood considerably lessened as a result of partial confessions of fraud on Anne's part, she ventured near. Elizabeth was stretched at full length on the grass, wet with the evening dew of late summer; her arms seemed to encircle some one in an unnatural embrace. Yet there was no one with

her. From time to time her head darted forward as if she were kissing the ghost within her clutch. Her eyes were passive and tender; her limbs were relaxed and sprawled almost indecently in a posture of complacence. Mrs. Faxen was fascinated and ventured nearer. Soft words penetrated the foliage. She heard Elizabeth talk in the accents of love. Suddenly she realized the significance of all this. From this point she watched the pantomimed liaison even more intently. The words she discovered meant nothing. They were tags of incantations, remembered and now disgorged confidences, surface memories. Elizabeth fed her soul on gestures. She reenacted and relived her little episode of passion with a conjured lover. The farewell was touching. Within herself Elizabeth made manifest the poignancy of her dismissal. Just for a moment Mrs. Faxen thought she too saw the darkly handsome schoolmaster. The next moment Elizabeth was crouched on the grass, her knees drawn under her, her hands hiding swift tears. Mrs. Faxen intuitively suspected that were she to go forward now and make her presence known Elizabeth's last dream might vanish. While Elizabeth wept the

other woman inventoried her gray, straggling hair, the unattractive figure, the ravaged face. Within her experience Mrs. Faxen had known no greater tragedy. Almost together they turned to leave, taking different paths. Only to Anne did the gossip entrust this delicate secret and in her telling there was a consideration for the extent of Elizabeth's loss.

Years march slowly for the indigent. There are few milestones of emotion. Want is always in the same latitude and longitude of the human heart. With the passing of years Mrs. Faxen's visits decreased. The mental condition of Mary and Elizabeth made it impracticable for Anne to continue her jaunts to nearby houses. Their visitors decreased. In ten years poverty again stalked them; a new generation had forgotten or ignored pledges made in warm-hearted pity by their parents.

Anne realized all this bitterly. Occasionally she sold a piece of furniture to a passing peddler. The region was infested with energetic young German Jews, political refugees from their own country, ardently seeking establishment here. She felt attracted

to these men, their dialect was not too remote from her own to make themselves intelligible one to the other. In addition to permitting her to rectify the forgetfulness of the family group they were almost her only source of intelligence on matters in the township.

One of these men was later to remember her kindness with tears. By then he was the owner of one of Easton's most prosperous stores. He had arrived at the Marson house very late one evening. He had made few sales that day and he admitted discouragement. His spirits were weighted down with loneliness; he had felt the stigma of the alien more keenly that day than usually. In the warm kitchen Anne, alone and seated on a rocker, had greeted him with kindness, had indicated a chair. He sank into it gratefully, his mind preoccupied with the problem of a lodging for the night. The tavern in the village was too costly and few of the farmers would consider lodging him. Peddlers were as suspect as the rare bands of roving gypsies.

"Mrs. Faxen died yesterday," he said quietly, aware of his role of newsmonger. To him Mrs.

Faxen had been merely a more than usually loquacious customer. To this woman she might be a source of interest. He thought he remembered seeing her here once.

"Mrs. Faxen, dead she is you say?" Anne replied turning toward him the eyes of a child suddenly aroused from sleep by the grotesque images of its dreams. His confirmatory nod set her the task of disguising her overwrought emotions from this stranger.

"Hungry?" she asked him, her voice thoroughly under control.

"Not hungry but worried over a place to sleep," he replied with direct simplicity.

Anne pondered this a few moments and then volunteered, "Not too bad is our barnloft and of hay there is enough to bed down warmly an' in comfort. Welcome you are to sleep there. Inside I would invite you but my sisters and me alone live an' not proper it would be."

He viewed her with amusement and then remembered the obligation of gratitude. His thanks were sincere. Together they sat by the fire venturing occasional

remarks one to the other but for the most part concerned with their own thoughts. Once he replenished the fire but when it burned low again she let him know that she desired to be alone. From the table lamp she drained a little oil into the rusted lantern and lighting it led him toward the barn. Satisfied that he was settled in for the night she withdrew, taking the lantern with her.

Returning to the house Anne extinguished both the lamp and lantern. Seating herself in a rocker by the window she cupped her chin in her hand and gazed meditatively at the dreary autumn scene. Without premeditation her thoughts reviewed these years since the reunion.

There was so little that had been exceptional in that time, she found; so little that in any way distinguished one day, or week, or month from another. The decline in the gifts and donations had been so gradual that economies and resultant want had seeped into their lives like water into an old but uncracked shoe. It was impossible in retrospect to recall exactly when or where this member of the family had left off calling. Deaths had frequently occurred

without their awareness. Few had taken thought to inform them of changes of any sort; they were almost completely out of touch with the entire township. It had been years since Anne had last visited. Eight years she thought it was, her right hand automatically computing it upon the digits of the left. Elizabeth had not gone out of the house since the reunion save on her almost daily pilgrimages to Hexenkopf. Anne remembered how she had attempted to stop these excursions in bad weather and the resultant sullenness and anger of Elizabeth. Up until just a few years back Mary had occasionally, usually at festival times, gone to church. Of late she had ceased that.

Almost the only departure from monotony had been Josiah's will. He had rarely been able to visit them after that day when he had so gallantly championed them. Knowing the defects of their education he never wrote them directly. Letters were exchanged by him and Mrs. Faxen. It had been Mrs. Faxen who had brought them the news of Josiah's death. Anne recalled Elizabeth's reaction. She had giggled ghoulishly and said, "Ach, old he was an'

ready to die." Anne had wished that Elizabeth had not said it but it would have done no good to reprove her.

From Mrs. Faxen they had learned of his bequest. Three plots he had left to them in his section of the family cemetery. In addition he had left a sum of money with which to purchase tombstones. His executors had arranged it all without consulting the recipients. One day Mrs. Faxen had driven up and bundled Anne into her carriage and driven her to the cemetery. There she had pointed out the plot of ground where they would rest when their trouble-ridden life had finished. Three neat blocks of granite stood there bearing their names in raised lettering and the date of their birth. Mrs. Faxen had turned and said, "Real nice it was of Josiah to be so thoughtful and nice tombstones they are. Few maiden women have better, Anne, an' grateful you should be." She could not know Anne's resentment of the need of perpetual gratitude.

Anne was informed when a group of relatives had removed the body of Elizabeth's still-born infant, buried at first in a weed-grown margin of the

cemetery, and reinterred it with more fitting ceremonies on this plot of Josiah's. Anne had never been able to think of it as something really theirs. It was a provision to preserve the family integrity and she was a little wearied with such matters. Over the baby's grave they had placed a small headstone with the word "Infant" neatly carved for all to see. It seemed to Anne that there was something indecent in the idea of that child sleeping eternally next to three women none of whom had ever experienced the rite of matrimony. The family had thought it only the decent thing to do. Sitting here alone she could clearly vision the plot and shuddered at the unavoidable destination of her remains. She experienced the animal desire to crawl off into some remote spot and die peacefully. Her hands sank into her lap and her back relaxed against the cushions of the chair as she visioned this possible peace.

Only one other phase of their life stood out, the enforced and unpleasant accounting of their lives to kindly busybodies. If a woman left a pound of sugar she wanted to know how it had been used. At first Anne had been noncommittal. 'With the years she

had found it necessary to compromise and partially explain. One incident returned vividly.

Sadie Greitz had been among the most generous of those who had pledged and had been the most faithful in keeping her promise. Her zeal for the Marsons' welfare extended itself to their souls. Grandmother to a precocious seven-year-old, she had used his services as messenger. How Anne had learned to hate the sight of his stout face and chubby body with his prying eyes carefully coached by his grandmother! Often she had felt the impulse to run when she had seen him turning into their lane. With the perversity of the insane Elizabeth had delighted in the youngster, had made much of him, even dressed more carefully and neatly when he was expected. Mary had suffered him in silence as she did most persons and things.

In aloof grandeur on the northern wall of the parlor was a mirror set in a hand-carved curly-maple frame. It would have been difficult to determine its intrinsic worth and antiques were not an economic consideration then. The child had seen and admired it upon one of his visits and carried back to his

grandmother a tale of its attraction and beauty. On his next visit she had accompanied him, curious to see what of value there might still be in this pauperized house. In her turn she had coveted it.

It was upon the occasion of this visit that Sadie had inaugurated the custom that most irked Anne. With elaborate excuses for their defective eyesight and education she had volunteered to read from the Bible. “I’m sure you girls a little scripture should like to hear once in awhile an’ glad I will be to come when I can.” With such pretentious simplicity she had prefaced the reading. While she read her mind was subconsciously concerned with acquiring the mirror. It would fit, she decided, just at the top landing of the stairs and would permit a hasty glance at her costume before entering the parlor on calling days. Of course, there was no hurry and so many things were needed. She could safely postpone it until some other visit. After all it would look badly to attempt its purchase on this her first visit in six months. In the meantime she would put a few more delicacies into her weekly basket. Perhaps with a few hints the Marsons might give it to her.

The full evil of Bible reading had never been demonstrated to Anne until the next weekly visit of the young boy. After the usual remarks she felt called upon to make, Anne retired from the scene to empty the basket. When she returned the child was missing. At first she thought he had hurried away but when she missed Elizabeth also she shrewdly suspected something was amiss. A moment later the hall door opened and he entered followed by Elizabeth who was beaming proudly. Balancing the family Bible on his stomach and clasping it tightly he advanced into the room. “Like Granny I shall read to you,” he said boldly. There was very little Anne could do without risk of offending his grandmother. Their list of donors was dangerously slim. She settled herself to listen.

Solemnly he opened the Book and began, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” With the amazement of the unlearned Mary and Anne gave ear. Elizabeth, having connived with him, fell asleep and accompanied his voice with sighing snores. Finished, he got up and bowed stiffly and made his departure. Anne returned the volume to its accustomed

place in the parlor and went on with the work of the house.

The following week he repeated the performance. Again he droned in a sing-song voice through the Twenty-third Psalm. Anne wondered a little at his selecting it again but said nothing. Week after week he returned, never seeming to weary of his youthful pomposity and exhibitionism. Annoyed Anne hid the book. Only for this one occasion was she spared his recital. When next he came he brought a New Testament and Psalms. It was after that that Anne decided not to care.

Sadie's intention of securing the mirror was long delayed. There had been the matter of a new dress for a wedding and after that a christening present for a niece. Finally she decided to call again. Her grandson went along. Without waiting for her to remove her wraps he darted into the parlor and brought out the heavy Bible, discarding the pocket Testament for this occasion. Primly he began.

"Mind you now, Earl, to keep quiet," his grandmother's tones cut across his rendition. "Not good it is for children always to be playing parson. Shut

the Bible an' sit quietly while I talk with Anne." Offended at his grandmother's reception he sulked in a corner until ready to leave. After that she experienced much difficulty in impressing him as a messenger to Anne. His rebellion resulted in a further cropping of their food supplies.

Mrs. Greitz had wasted little time in getting to the point. "The looking glass in the parlor Aunt Susan's was I suppose," she said. "Like it I do an' wondering I was whether willing to sell it you would be." She stopped at the queer expression on Anne's face. "What's wrong?" she inquired abruptly.

"Ach, Sadie, sold it I did last week a peddler to," Anne declared, startled out of her usual caution.

Her visitor's face clouded. "Sold Aunt Susan's looking glass to a peddler!" she exclaimed. From her voice Anne decided that she had been guilty of a major crime. "An' for what did you need money so bad? Food we see that you have an' other things an' only right it would have been had you brought it to us as are your relations an' were Susan's too."

Thoughtlessly Anne had replied, "Elizabeth, she

wanted to have glasses like as you had on last time an' glasses an' a bit of money he gave me for it."

Sadie had bridled at that. “Glasses! An’ what for should a crazy woman as can’t read want with glasses? Ach, no wonder it is that poor you are like this when so foolish you do things,” she accused. Afterward she had only stopped a few minutes longer most of which time she had consumed in quieting the crying boy who had followed the conversation and joined her in resenting the loss of the mirror. Her visits after that, Anne recalled, had been very short and aloof. Anne remembered too the dwindling quantities of food she had continued sending. But Sadie was dead now like Mrs. Faxen and others and it did no good to remember such things, Anne decided.

The room was chill now. Anne had banked the fire more than an hour before and had failed to notice the passage of time. Her mind reluctantly returned to the present. She must darn the quilt on Elizabeth’s bed before her restless tossing ripped it farther. Quilts and blankets were scarce and those they had were badly worn. She must ask some one to

provide warmer coverings. Both of her sisters had complained of rheumatic pains and the nights were becoming colder. She sighed as she thought of the meagre supply of wood and food. She must ask, but it was difficult to think of any one to whom she might turn. With the death of Mrs. Faxen almost the last of their active friends was gone.’As she climbed the stairs to bed her mind was busied in canvassing the living members of the older generation. As she undressed she realized that only two women stood between her and a more serious predicament than they had yet known, Mrs. Amelia Huffnagel and Mrs. Sarah Rapp. She would go to them in the morning, she promised herself as she fell asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MRS. Faxen had been dead three years. Anne remembered her affectionately as she huddled closer between Elizabeth and Mary in the old-fashioned carved walnut bed and dragged the covers closer about their necks. Beside her they slept blissfully. It had been two days now since they had eaten. It had not been right to eat so gluttonously, Anne meditated, but they had been so hungry. It seemed as if they had lived on bacon and bread for months and it had been good to taste fresh beef again. Her hands were cold and she thrust them between her knees to warm them. Three years since Mrs. Faxen had died, she remembered. She wondered whether they would live three years more and if so how. It would be better, she decided, for Elizabeth and Mary if they were to die. She coughed hectically. It was terrible to have to cough like that; she felt weak and sick in the pit of her

stomach. As if answering Anne's cough Mary started. Her frame was racked with the force of her coughing. Anne shivered. She was afraid of this cough. It was not like the colds they had had before. The others she had doctored with pepper tea but this had not yielded to that simple medication. The beef was good. She wondered when the storekeeper would bring another basket.

For five months they had been wards of the County Poor Commissioner. Each week he had deposited three dollars with the general store in Robbsville. With this the proprietor was supposed to provide food for the three sisters. The Commissioner deprecated their stupidity. The Poor House at Nazareth was an excellent place and people such as they were should be willing to go there. But you couldn't let them starve to death. So he had made the allotment of three dollars weekly. "Old women like them don't eat much an' they'll get along somehow. Guess there's been lots of times they wished they had that much each week," he told his supervisor. The supervisor nodded agreement. He was expected to do nothing more than that.

But it was as the result of his call at the Marsons that he had discovered how things were. “Get enough in your basket each week, don’t you? What’s in it?” he asked gruffly. They were the only County wards in this township and he had to make a twelve-mile detour to check up on them. His question was perfunctory; usually he didn’t wait for an answer. This time his horse was tired and it was convenient for him to rest here out of the cold for a few brief minutes. He spread his hands toward the stove.

“Bacon and bread there is but nothing more.” Anne’s voice had quivered in replying. He looked up in surprise.

As if by an arrangement of fate the delivery boy intruded at that moment without the courtesy of knocking. Unused to seeing any one here but the sisters he hesitated a moment before walking across the room and emptying his basket upon the table. “Here’s your stuff,” he said and was off.

The supervisor crossed the room and ripped open the strings about the two paper-wrapped bundles. From one he took half a fitch of bacon, its skin moldy, from the other several loaves of stale bread.

Holding these he turned and said, “Is that what you always get?” “Yes,” Anne answered.

No wonder, he thought, that they looked so thin. And what a Hell of a way for the grocer to treat the County. “And him a Democrat and the postmaster,” he muttered audibly. Clapping on his hat he gathered the food and started for the door. He’d show the skunk, he decided. But Anne had intruded herself between him and the exit. He stopped short. “Please,” she said. “Nothing my sisters an’ me have eaten today an’ sick they are, you know. Let it here, please!” He gasped. “Listen, I’m going down to the store and get you some good food. This ain’t fit for pigs.” And he rushed from the house to conceal his emotions. It wasn’t right, he thought, to give a man a job like this after all he’d done for the party. His whip cut his horse’s thigh cruelly as he turned toward the village.

He had returned in an hour with a heavy basket. It was from this basket that the beef had come. Instinct told him that he had better leave before they started eating. Elizabeth fingered the meat suggestively. He was not sure it would reach the stove before being eaten. Animals he had callously trapped

when a small boy had had that look in their eyes after several days of starvation. He'd keep a close eye on these women or the damned fools would let themselves be starved to death. With that resolution he left.

Lying in bed Anne inventoried every article that had been in that basket. She wished there had been wood and blankets as well as food. She had spent the morning dragging rails from the decaying fences of nearby fields. Now she was too tired to chop them and start a fire in the kitchen stove. She drowsed off.

It was over a week later that the supervisor returned. He had meant to be back sooner but there had been several deaths at the Poor House and he had been too busy. He knocked several times without getting any response. Without waiting to knock again he entered. Inside he stopped to shout, "Hey, where's everybody?" A feeble response came from upstairs. In his haste to respond he almost precipitated himself down the cellar stairs. Righting himself and cursing violently he rushed down the hallway and up the stairs leading to the bedrooms. Visions of possibly dead women assailed him. He

cursed the number of stairs, the confusion of doors at the top. Finally he threw open the right one.

Elizabeth grinned at him fatuously. He knew there was no information to be gotten from her. He crossed the room and felt of Anne's pulse. It was almost imperceptible. Mary was breathing regularly but with difficulty. As he leaned closer to inspect Anne more thoroughly Elizabeth struck at him violently. With one hand he pinned her to the bed and held her there for a minute despite her squirming. There was clearly no time to be lost. Uncertain what to do he glanced toward the window and seeing a passing farmer in a buggy threw it open and yelled lustily, "Hey! Stop an' give me a hand, will you? Two of the Marson girls are dying and the other's crazier than usual." The farmer gaped at him for a moment and then jumped from his wagon and hurried around to the back door on a run.

Together they restrained Elizabeth. All of her old protective instinct for her sisters seemed to have returned. Threshing wildly about in spite of her bonds she obstructed the efforts of the two men. Desperately the supervisor thrust her into an open

clothes closet and shut the door. Then he delegated the farmer to bring a doctor. “Oram, if you can get him,” he called as an afterthought. “He’s a rum-pot but he knows medicine.” Sitting alone by the bedside he fumbled in his pockets and found his pipe. He held it delicately between his thumb and forefinger and then decided against smoking it. It seemed to him as if hours had passed when the door opened, admitting his emissary and the partially sobered physician.

Walking to the bed Doctor Oram looked at the occupants. “Old friends,” he said genially as he opened his bag and took out his stethoscope. “Pneumonia, I’ll bet my bottom dollar an’ a keg of whiskey,” he muttered as he gave ear to Anne’s breathing. As he straightened he asked, “Where’s the crazy one?” They indicated Elizabeth’s presence with jerks of their thumbs. Oram tossed his instrument in the general direction of his bag and went toward the door. “Don’t let her out, she’s mad as Hell,” they cautioned him. Opening the closet door an inch he looked in at the ranting woman. “That’s what comes of a woman talking to the Devil,” he observed

as he returned to the bedside. The next minute he was absorbed in the battle to prolong their lives.

Weakened by inadequate food and shelter it was a delicate and difficult task Oram undertook. Sanitary conveniences there were none. Hospitals were out of the question. With relays of neighboring women he battled for four weeks before he admitted defeat. Facing the Poor Commissioner he gave diagnosis in one word, “Consumption, can’t do anything for ’em. It’s a shame, they were good girls.”

In this time Anne had rallied and was able to sit up in bed and occasionally walk about the room on wobbling legs. Conscious of the presence of alien housewives she worried about the condition of the house, begged to be allowed to go downstairs that she might tell them where things were to be found. Oram grimly refused. “Let her go downstairs and try to climb up and she’d spit blood for a week and that’d end her,” he told the woman on duty that day.

With or without consent the Poor Commissioner decided they must be removed to the County House. “Can’t expect the women to keep goin’ in forever,”

he told Oram, “an’ you know what the County can pay you.”

“I guess you’re right,” Oram replied. He was sober and depressed as a result. “I’m sorry to see it end this way. They’ve put up a game fight and I’d like to see ’em end up here. Hell! I guess it don’t matter so much where we die. I’ll put ’em under with laudanum and save you an argument,” he volunteered. He refused to admit that he was moved to the use of the narcotic as a merciful measure for the girls in leaving their homestead. In these days he was being chary of sentiment. He couldn’t afford it. He handed them the sleeping potion himself and kept careful watch until it had safely taken effect. Then he directed the removal to the springwagons, carefully upholstered with mattresses and pillows, in which they were to be transported to the alms house. As the wagons drove off he watched them with regret. Passing his handkerchief over a sweating forehead he withdrew to the interior of the house for a drink of rye.

The Marson sisters slept peacefully on their trip to the alms house. They had never been this far

from their home before in their lives but they were unconscious of this last jest of Fate. Hours later they awoke to the recognition of strange beds in strange surroundings, separated from each other and units in a dormitory of aged and sickly women.

Strangely enough it was Anne who protested to the overworked and slatternly matron in charge of them. “Home I should be in the house that is rightfully ours. Given to us it was until we die an’ die there I wanted rather than here to come.” It was an old story to the matron. “Now, keep quiet an’ eat your soup,” she replied as she had so often before and was to continue doing until her husband’s term of office expired.

Only Elizabeth seemed to completely accept the change. Mary was restless and kept tossing constantly. Three weeks after their arrival Anne was astounded to see Oram enter the dormitory. “Well, are you better?” he demanded. “A little stronger I feel but like it here I do not,” she responded. “It’s better that you should be here, Anne,” he replied and passed on to the beds of her sisters. Elizabeth sat upright suddenly and seemed to recognize him.

The next moment she was shrieking madly. He shrugged his shoulders and returned to Anne.

"Anne," he started, "I've known you and your sisters a long time and liked you. I've been your friend, Anne, and I want to be. But it seems best to me to tell you that there's nothing can be done now. I'm sorry, awfully sorry but I think I ought to tell you." If he expected Anne to show fear he was disappointed. She smiled gently and confidently asked, "Which one of us will it be first, doctor." Tears welled in his eyes, "I can't tell, Anne, but it can't be much longer." He patted her hand fondly and left the room.

In the days that followed Anne seemed to have found rest. She was almost completely silent. It was in such a moment of silence that the end came. All that afternoon she had been asleep, waking just as the last rays of the sun illumined the dirty windows. Hardly had she opened her eyes when she closed them in her final sleep. They covered the still form with a sheet and let her rest there until the ward slept before removing her body to the little cell where the undertaker awaited it.

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Mary was told next day and heard the news in silence. But it was the signal for her end as well. Two days more she claimed at the hands of life before surrendering. Her body followed Anne to the little mortuary.

Once again the family responded. Pastor Zigenfuss, who had succeeded Hellmuth and never had found occasion for visiting the sisters, was delegated to make the arrangements. A corps of the women of the family descended upon the homestead and put in order the front room. It was the only habitable room in the house now. It seemed as if the house, tenantless of its proper mistresses, had conspired at its own ruin. Part of the roof had fallen in and the floors in the upper story had decayed so badly it was unsafe to walk across them.

So for the last time the girls were returned with a proper measure of ceremony to their home. Their life right was severed now. Elizabeth's equity was supreme. From it they were taken in a plume-decked hearse up the long hill to the cedar crowned burial place. The headstones, well-weathered by passing years, looked more friendly now; there was a restful

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quality in the squares of sod stacked neatly awaiting replacement on the open graves. With the exception of the clergyman and parish officials there

were no mourners.

Three months later they laid Elizabeth by her sisters. A little measure of tranquillity had been vouchsafed her weary mind before the end, not sanity but a quietude she had not known in years. She broke silence for the first time in several days when dying she murmured gently, “By Salatheel, Michael, Raphael, an’ Uriel.” The house was too far gone now to permit of its reopening for her funeral. She was buried with quiet services from St. Paul’s Church. It was as if she could not possibly escape a peace she had spent her life in avoiding.

Returning from the cemetery Pastor Zigenfuss stopped his carriage and unlocked the front door of their house. Accompanied by the family lawyer he glanced about, authorized to remove anything they thought of value. Side by side with the family Bible lay the books which Elizabeth had once proudly borne from “Blind Pete’s” cottage. Stepping determinedly to the fireplace the preacher lit a match and

held them to the flame. He watched prayerfully while they burned. “Perhaps we shall never free ourselves of this,” he remarked to the lawyer, indicating the burning books, “but I hope no one else shall ever suffer as much for a mistaken belief. Or any belief,” he added. Gathering the Bible into his arms he left the house. Against the late afternoon sun Hexenkopf silhouetted its defiance of his power. Still it stood in hexened ground, its base wreathed in ground ivy, its crannies welcoming the warmth of columbine.

THE END


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